



*Slava Brodsky*

*Funny  
Children's Stories*

*Notes of a twelve-year-old boy*

*Translated from Russian  
by Helen Leyzerovich*

*Трохольский пер.*

*Manhattan Academia*

**SLAVA BRODSKY** was born in Georgia (former Soviet Union) but lived most of his life in Moscow (Russia). He got his mathematician's diploma from Moscow State University and PhD from Russian Academy of Sciences. He authored and co-authored several books in applied mathematical statistics. In 1991, he came to the United States. Since then he has worked in Manhattan's financial industry. He is currently Vice President of MetLife Group, Inc. Slava Brodsky began his literary career in 2004 when his first novel was published. He lives in Millburn, New Jersey, with his wife. His website is [www.slavabrodsky.com](http://www.slavabrodsky.com).



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This edition is an English translation of a recently published Russian book, together with publisher's comments for the American public. The book is a collection of short children's stories about the events that took place in Moscow (Russia) in the mid-fifties of the last century, a decade after the end of World War II. These stories may be of interest to both children and adults. Children will find many truly funny episodes in the book and will be able to look at the capital of Russia in the middle of the twentieth century through the eyes of a twelve-year-old boy. Adults will be able to look at the same events through their own eyes. They also will laugh or perhaps be a bit sad.

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Translated from Russian by Helen Leyzerovich  
with editing help by Maria Tyutyunik and Baha Rudin

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*In memory of my parents*



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## *Publisher's Preface*

At the beginning of last summer, an old friend of mine from Moscow stayed at my house. He told me all sorts of stories, both happy and sad. Among other things, he informed me that his distant relative had passed on to him three thick school notebooks filled with the notes of an unknown boy and implored him to read them.

Right before leaving Moscow, my friend read these notes, became excited by their contents, and decided to bring them over to me. He also added that his relative told him that after the death of their owner, these notebooks were passed from one person to another several times with a last request from the author: to publish the notes either under a fictitious name or under the name of the publisher. My friend told me that the notes, in essence, were short funny stories and, in his opinion, must be published without any doubt. However, he had neither the time nor the means to do that, and so all his hopes rested with me.

As soon as I began to read the boy's stories, I immediately started to wonder whether I should, indeed, accept all responsibility and expenses for their publication. And just in a few days, I was already working on editing them.

I must say that I tried to make as few corrections as possible in the stories since they were written simply, briefly, and clearly. I only made minor editing changes and deciphered illegibly written words.

The boy himself, apparently, did not consider his notes as stories. So none of them had titles. After a short period of

hesitation, I took the liberty of adding titles on behalf of the author. And I hope that by doing so I did not ruin the story line but only bestowed some necessary order on the text.

Before I sent the manuscript to a printing company, I asked my friend to find out whether some light could be shed on any details of the boy's life. A short time later, my friend replied that no further information about the author of the stories could be obtained since none of those who had kept his notebooks was still alive.

And so, it remains for me to add just a few words. From the text of the notes, it follows that the boy lived in Moscow. However, it is difficult to say for sure where exactly in Moscow the described events took place. Based on what I have read and fragmentary information about the distant relative of my friend, I can only assume, with a certain degree of confidence, that everything happened not far from Moscow's square of three train stations. Most likely, where Bolshaya Pereyaslavskaya Street intersects with Bezbozhny Lane (now Protopopovsky Lane) and Kalanchevka Street, or where Bolshoi Balkansky Lane goes up from Kalanchevka.

It is safe to say that the stories were written in the mid-fifties of the past century, more than ten years after the end of World War II. At that time, the area of the three train stations and surrounding streets were considered a restless region of Moscow. Yet, apparently, the boy came from a rather prosperous family. In the stories, he indicated his own age – twelve, and I think there is no reason to doubt that.

Slava Brodsky  
Millburn, New Jersey  
March 17, 2007

# *Funny Children's Stories*

*Notes  
of a twelve-year-old boy*



## *The Hockey Stick*

Today we played hockey. In the winter we play hockey very often. Because in the winter it is the most interesting thing we can do. And our winters last for a long time. They last for nearly half a year, from November to March. But sometimes it can snow even in April and October.

Honestly, it is not quite hockey. We do not play on ice. We play on pressed snow. So we play without skates. We just run in shoes or, more often, in felt boots. And if we run in felt boots then we, of course, wear galoshes over them.

Sometimes they make a skating rink for us. But first of all, this happens very rarely, and second, we play in felt boots anyway. We play in felt boots because the ice is uneven. So it is difficult to skate on it. Besides, not everyone has skates.

Today there was no ice in the rink. But we trampled the snow so hard that the puck went over it just fine. It moved very well. It almost slid. And it slid over the snow because our puck is very good.

We make it out of an empty tin can. But not out of a tall can, of course. We make a puck out of a flat tin. And the best tin is one that is opened only a quarter or a third of the way, no more.

If we put something heavy inside and bend the lid back, it becomes a pretty decent puck. And there is no fuss with it. We hide it somewhere right in our yard. And we have never lost it. Probably because no one else has any need for it.

There is another difference between our game and real hockey. We play without hockey sticks. But not because we do

not have them. Some of us do have hockey sticks. Using tin metal, we attach an oblong piece of plywood to a wooden stick, thus making a Canadian hockey stick. But not everyone has such a stick. And when someone plays with a hockey stick and someone else, without a hockey stick, it ends very badly for the stick. When the stick collides with a felt boot, it immediately breaks. For this reason, we are afraid to play with hockey sticks. However, if someone has a hockey stick, he still brings it out to the yard. But he brings it just for the warm up. And when we start to keep score, everybody knows that it is better to put the hockey stick aside.

But our hockey net is real. Well, it is almost real. We score goals under a bench. The puck has to pass between the legs of the bench, under its seat. And this is exactly the spot where our hockey sticks most often break. Because when you push the puck under the bench with your felt boot, no hockey stick can withstand it. By the end of December, all our benches are covered with snow. Then we come up with something else.

Today a boy from our yard decided to play with his stick when we kept score. And my friend Gleb Paramonov, with whom I have shared a desk at school since first grade, broke this hockey stick right away.

The problem was that the stick was not homemade. It was a real hockey stick from a store. That was the first time in my life that I have seen a hockey stick like that. The boy who brought it said that the stick was for Russian hockey. It was not straight and thin at the bottom like a Canadian stick. It was round and thick. And it seemed so durable that none of us thought it could ever be broken, especially that quickly.

So the boy who brought the hockey stick started to fight with Gleb. But when he started to fight, I reminded him of the rules we had in our yard. Everyone knows them. If you decide to play with a hockey stick and I break your stick, then I am not responsible for what happened. Well, obviously I am not responsible as long as I did not do it on purpose. That is the rule. And Gleb did not break it on purpose. Everyone saw that.

Well, and of course, after hockey I came home all wet. And my mom did not like it. My mom never likes it when I come home wet. But after hockey, you cannot come home dry. And because after hockey you are supposed to be wet, Mom does not like it when I play hockey. She always wants me to switch to something else.

Last year Mom took me to the swimming pool to sign me up for swimming classes. But at the pool, they said that Mom brought me in too late. Then Mom asked what time we should have come at. And they replied that they did not mean that. They meant that it was already too late to make an Olympic champion out of me. I should have begun much earlier. They told Mom that she should have brought me in when I was five years old.

Mom argued and asked them to sign me up for beginner class. But they replied that they did not have beginner classes. And when Mom started to insist, they said, "Okay, leave your child. But if he sinks, we will not be held responsible." So we left.

I continued to play hockey. And Mom kept being upset when I came home wet.

Today Mom was upset again that I came home wet.

She told me that it was only Tuesday and I looked as dirty as if it was already Saturday. And she might have to fire up our gas boiler to wash me.

And she would have to change my bed linen every week, like in the best hotels abroad. And she would have to see if my shirt from yesterday had dried.

Mom also said that if she had not yelled for me to come home on time, I would have probably died out there, in the yard, right next to the tin can.

Yesterday's shirt turned out to be dry. But Mom still could not calm down. She told me that she hoped I would not take my wet clothes off on the staircase and dry them. And if I was stupid enough to do so, I would easily catch a cold.

And when I hesitated with my answer, Mom was horrified and said that she just did not know what to do. She probably should not punish me for my back being wet. Because with such unreasonable behavior, I could easily catch pneumonia.

So I had no choice but to promise Mom that I would not let my back get wet again. Finally, Mom calmed down, and I started to do my homework.

As I was doing my homework, I could not stop thinking about the broken hockey stick. Before it was broken, I had held it a little in my hands. Of course, it was terribly beautiful. Its edges were not sharp. They were rounded. And the whole hockey stick was covered with some wonderful varnish. The stick had such beautiful curves that shivers went down my spine. And I thought to myself that I was very lucky that we had a yard where we could play hockey. I was lucky that many kids in our yard liked hockey. And I thought that all this was just great.

And as for Mom's idea about my wet back – I mean, about undressing outside on the staircase and drying my wet clothing – I liked it very much.

## *The Handkerchief*

I do not like to lie. My mom thinks that I never lie. Therefore, I never do lie. I do not even say things that are untrue. Because if my mom found out that I said something that was not true, it would be the end of the world. And I do not want it to be the end of the world.

But sometimes it is very difficult to tell the truth. Sometimes telling the truth is just impossible. But those are completely different things: to say something that is not true or not to tell the truth.

For example, yesterday Mom gave me money for school breakfast. And when she saw that I put the money into my pants' pocket, she did not like it. She suggested putting the money into the pocket of my school jacket so that I would not lose it.

But I did not put my money into the pocket of my school jacket and just said that I would not lose the money, "Don't worry, Mom." And I went to school. Well, unfortunately, it so happened that I did lose my money. I think it happened because I had my handkerchief in the same pocket where I put my money. And it is most likely that I lost my money as I was taking out the handkerchief.

When I came home from school, Mom did not ask me whether I had lost my money or not. If she had asked me about it, I would never have lied to her. I would have certainly told her that I had lost the money. But it did not occur to Mom to ask me this question.

I also made it seem as though I was in a very good mood. Because if I had not been my usual self, Mom would have immediately asked me what was wrong. But I did not want Mom to ask me these kinds of questions.

In the evening, at dinner, Mom asked Dad whether he was late for work because he had left home later than usual. Dad said that he was not late for work. But he did get in later than usual and saw how people were running to the entrance gates. And Dad pitied them. Dad especially pitied the old women. They were barely able to run, but they were afraid to be late. So they ran. "However," Dad said, "I hope that nowadays they will no longer send people to prison for being one minute late."

And here Mom gave Dad THE look. It was supposed to mean that Dad should not have said this in front of me because I was still too young.

But in reality Mom does not object to Dad saying this in front of me. Because Mom knows that I am no longer little. If Mom really did not want Dad to say these things, Dad would not, under any circumstances, say anything. I cannot remember Dad ever doing anything that Mom did not like.

So I think that when Mom gives Dad this look, she does it just for my sake. To make sure that I understand that at my age I should not be hearing things like what Dad said. And if I, for whatever reason, did hear it, I should not talk about it anywhere.

Then Mom started to ask Dad what interesting things happened at work. And Dad said that nothing interesting had happened. Everything was as usual. And that all the tracing paper had been pilfered from the drafters again. And Mom said that she was not surprised. Because food could be properly wrapped only in tracing paper.

Then Dad complained that, for whatever reason, the standard menu for lunch suddenly had been changed and now they would be given jelly instead of dried-fruit compote.

And here I told my parents that my tooth hurt. I said this because I was worried that they might ask me about what I had

eaten at school. Then I would have had to confess that I had not eaten anything because I had lost my money. And as soon as I said that my tooth hurt, I became sad. Because it turned out that I had lied. And this was even worse than when I pretended to be in a good mood.

But then I calmed down a little because my tooth actually did hurt. So it turned out that I had not lied.

And when Mom asked me how my tooth was, I said that it hurt only a little. And that was also true. And Mom suggested that I should not drink or eat anything hot or cold and we would see how I would feel then.

That evening, as I was lying in bed, trying to fall asleep, I did not feel well. I did not feel well because of this whole story with the money and my tooth. And I tried to imagine what would have happened if I had told Mom that I had lost the money.

Probably, Mom would have immediately said that she knew I would lose my money. But this is what I do not like most of all. I really do not like when Mom tells me "I knew that." Because it makes it seem like I am plain stupid. It is as though it was immediately clear to Mom that I could lose my money but it did not even cross my mind.

Actually, I also thought that I could lose the money if I put it into the same pocket as my handkerchief. I am not as stupid as Mom thinks I am. The problem was that my other pockets were even worse.

In my jacket, for example, in one pocket, I kept coins mixed in with mud, while in the other, I kept a copper wire. And this wire made a pretty big hole in that pocket. Well, of course, I did not tell Mom about this. I did not say anything about it because I was late to school and because in the morning my tongue does not want to move at all.

That was what I was thinking about as I was lying in bed, trying to fall asleep late last night. And I thought that if I had just told Mom that I had lost the money, I would not have had to deal with all these problems yesterday and maybe even the

following day too. And with these thoughts, I fell asleep yesterday.

Today, when I woke up, I immediately recalled the whole story of what happened yesterday. And I also recalled the handkerchief, which caused me to lose my money. What was going on? It seems that I blew my nose, wrapped it up into the handkerchief, and put it all in my pocket. That was just ridiculous. Something was definitely wrong here. It should not be like this. Something was not right.

## *Pygmies*

Today we had a homeroom session. Actually, a few days ago we knew that we would soon have a homeroom session. Because someone eavesdropped as our Russian literature teacher was being told off by our principal for not having it every month. It turned out that we had not had homeroom for a long, long time.

And those of us who were not doing well in school became a little bit nervous. The guy who was nervous the most was Pudovkin. He was usually picked on more often than anyone else.

The very first day, when Pudovkin showed up in our classroom, we gave him the nickname Pud. Not just because of his last name. Pud is a very big guy. His fists are especially big. They are as heavy as a pood.\* So Pud certainly lives up to his nickname.

Pud always sits in the back row. He sits there because only in the back are there desks large enough to fit him.

He is used to everyone blaming him for something. When his name is mentioned on any occasion, he replies from the last row, "Why Pudovkin? I didn't do anything."

He says it so often that our teachers have a ready comeback for him. Most often they answer, "It's not good that you did not do anything. In school, you must learn!"

---

\* Pood is a Russian unit of mass approximately equal to 36 international pounds.

The person who makes fun of him the most is our math teacher. As she sees him there, dozing off in the back, she comes up to him and loudly says, "Pudy!"

Pud shudders, raises his head and looks at her, astonished. And the math teacher curtseys in front of Pud, spreads out her skirt, and says, "Hellooo!" And each time, it sounds very funny. After our math teacher makes a curtsey and says "Hellooo!" to Pud, she takes him by the collar and drags him to the blackboard.

And at the blackboard, we witness a very funny scene. She starts to ask him, "Tell us, Pudy, where are all the Bs? Where are all the Cs?" Then she takes him by the collar again, rubs his nose into the blackboard, where the formulas are written in chalk, and says, "Here are all the Bs! Here are all the Cs!" And when our math teacher rubs Pud's nose into the blackboard, we laugh so hard that tears stream down our faces.

Afterwards, our math teacher becomes tired of dragging Pud around. So she lets him go, saying, "Get out of here, you dummy!"

Once, after this happened, Pud rushed to the door. But the math teacher yelled, "Where are you going, Pudy?!" And Pud stopped, not knowing what he should do next. And the math teacher said, "Get out of here! Back to your desk!"

Usually, all these scenes end the same way. As Pud walks back to his desk, the math teacher says, "Wretched idiot! Bring your *Mamsell* here tomorrow." This means that she wants Pud to have his mother come to school the next morning.

Once, after she said "Bring your *Mamsell* here tomorrow," she asked him whether he understood what she said to him. And Pud said "yes", but he shook his head "no."

Of course, we all guessed what he meant by that. He answered "yes" because he understood what the math teacher told him. But he shook his head "no" because he was scared to even think of telling his mom about all that.

And the math teacher, of course, noticed this right away and told Pud that he spoke like a Bulgarian. It turns out that in

Bulgaria, everything is backwards. When they say "no," they nod. But when they say "yes," they shake their heads from side to side.

Well, anyway, today Pud became very nervous as soon as he heard the news about homeroom.

But Pud was not the only one. Usually, we expected that Pud would be scolded, and everything would end at that. But this time nothing special had happened to Pud. And because nothing special had happened to Pud, everyone became nervous. Everyone tried to guess what our teacher would talk about. And I too became a little bit nervous.

And so the time came for our homeroom session. Our homeroom teacher — our Russian teacher — entered the classroom, greeted us, stood near the first row of desks, crossed his arms, moved his glasses to his nose, looked at us over the rim of his glasses, raised his pencil, and said, "Some students behave like pigs. For example, Pudovkin."

Pud immediately replied, "Why Pudovkin? I didn't do anything."

Of course, our homeroom teacher said, "It's not good that you didn't do anything."

But Pud paid no attention to that and again began to mumble that he did not do anything.

Then our homeroom teacher said, "Shhhhhh! Don't talk so much! You'll have my comments on your report card."

And all of us immediately started to plead, "Please, don't. Please, please..." Because we knew that Pud's mom is very strict. She gives him a heavy beating for each bad comment in his report card, so that Pud comes to school covered in bruises.

And here our homeroom teacher took out a notebook and started to tell us about what we had already covered and what additional topics we would learn in his class this year.

About half an hour later, the door to our classroom was unexpectedly opened and our principal entered the room. Everyone immediately stood up. The principal said, "Hello." Usually, our teachers say, "Hello class, you may sit down." But

the principal only said, "Hello." Still some of us sat down. But I continued to stand, and several others continued to stand too.

Then the principal looked directly at me and asked, "What's so funny?" And I realized that I was smiling. As soon as the principal asked "What's so funny?" I immediately stopped smiling. But it was already too late, of course.

And here someone asked, "May we sit down?"

And our homeroom teacher said, "Sit down, sit down."

And then everyone sat down. Here the principal said that he knew that in our class, students were not students but simply pygmies.\* And that some of us (and he looked at me again) had even lost their human appearance because everything was always funny to them.

"Some of you," he added still looking in my direction, "always stick their big noses into everything."\*\* Such individuals should behave more modestly. Those who do not understand this can be thrown out of school in a minute."

The principal began to explain to us how we should behave in school. "What were you talking about?" the principal asked our homeroom teacher.

"We're just talking about what you said," replied the homeroom teacher. "I was just telling them that they behave like pigs."

"Pygmies," the principal said and started towards the doors. We all rose. "Goodbye," said the principal and went out of the classroom.

The principal left, but we still remained standing.

"May we sit down?" someone asked again.

"Sit down, sit down," the homeroom teacher said. Then he paused for a moment and said, "I told you that you behaved like..." And he hesitated for a moment.

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\* Offensive remarks toward people other than Russians (like the one made by the principal about pygmies) are quite common in Russia.

\*\* Another offensive remark – "big nose" – towards Jewish people in Russia.

And I quickly added, "... like pigs?"

Here everyone laughed. Because what I said turned out to be very funny. Even though I did not expect that at all. And our homeroom teacher looked at me very unkindly and said, "You'll have my comments on your report card." Then he added, "Homeroom is over. Go home."

I went home and thought about why I was always smiling and how many problems it caused me. It seems that I am not always aware that I am smiling. Even when I think I am just looking at someone, I am actually, for some reason, smiling.

Maybe my mouth and cheeks are shaped that way? Maybe they are somehow sculpted in the form of a smile?

And then I recalled what our math teacher told us about Bulgaria. I mean I recalled that when Bulgarians say "no," they nod. And when they say "yes," they shake their heads from side to side.

And here is what I thought. If such a thing is possible in Bulgaria, then there might exist other countries where something else is backwards. What if there is such a country where it is good when you smile and not good when you do not. And if such country exists then I would like to know about it. I just simply need to know. Then it would be much easier for me to live my life.

## *The Tea Spoon*

I got sick yesterday. Caught a cold. I even had a fever. And Dad suggested Mom give me a couple of aspirins. But Mom said that she did not want to self-medicate and that she would call for a doctor.

And then Dad said that it did not make any sense to call for a doctor. Because she would not have much time for me. She would need to make dozens of house calls and still find enough time to do some grocery shopping. So it was very easy to predict that there would be no point in her coming here.

Mom and Dad began to argue about whether or not they should call for a doctor. And then Dad said that he could easily predict everything that the doctor would do. But Mom said that because Dad does not have any medical background, there was no way that he could foresee what the doctor would do.

But Dad insisted that he already knew exactly what would happen. And if Mom wanted, he would act it out right then and there.

I asked Dad what it meant—to act it out. And Dad said that he would pretend to be a doctor.

I liked that idea very much and started to ask Mom and Dad to act it out together. At first, Mom did not want to do it, but eventually she agreed. Dad only asked that everything should be as though it was for real. And that Mom should even bring a clean towel for him while he washed his hands.

And so, Dad left our room.\* Then he went out of our apartment onto the staircase and closed the door. And Mom and I waited to see what would happen next.

The bell rang. My mom went to open the door. And I asked Mom not to close the door of our room, so that I could hear everything they might say out in the corridor.

So Mom opened the door.

Dad said, "Hello. Did you call for a doctor?"

And I heard Mom laughing as she answered, "Hello. Yes, we did. Our child is sick."

Dad asked my mom where he could wash his hands. Mom came into our room, took a towel, and brought it to Dad. Dad started to wash his hands. And I heard the water running down the drain of our kitchen sink.

Finally, Mom and Dad entered our room. And then I understood why Mom laughed when she opened the door for Dad. Because Dad had managed to throw on a white rag to make it look like he was wearing a doctor's smock.

But Dad was not laughing and was not even smiling. He asked where he could sit down. Mom moved a chair next to my bed. But Dad said that he needed to be able to write and sat down at our round dinner table. Dad asked what was wrong and whether the child had a fever. And Mom answered that the child had a cold and a slight fever.

Then Dad asked Mom to bring a clean teaspoon. When Mom gave Dad a spoon, Dad came up to me and said, "Open your mouth." I opened my mouth. Dad pressed down on my tongue with the spoon and asked me to say "ah."

Then Dad sat down at the table again, took out his pen, and wrote "Aspirin" on a sheet of paper. He stood up from the chair and went to the door. Dad opened the door, turned to my mom, and said, "In three days, come to my office with your child."

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\* It seems that the boy and his parents lived together in the same room.

Then Mom said to Dad that the whole thing did not seem realistic and that she would still call the doctor tomorrow morning. "At least to get a release slip for work," said Mom. At that time, Dad did not object.

Today the doctor came to our apartment in the evening when Dad had already come home. When the bell rang, Mom went to open the door. And again, I asked Mom not to close the door of our room.

Mom opened the outside door, and I heard a woman's voice, "Hello. Did you call for a doctor?"

"Hello," replied my mom, "Yes, we did. Our child is sick."

The doctor asked my mom where she could wash her hands. Mom ran into our room, took a clean towel, and took it to the kitchen. I again heard the water running down the drain.

And then they entered our room. Dad pointed to the chair at the round table. The doctor sat down and asked, "What's wrong with the child?"

Mom said that I had a cold.

"Fever?" asked the doctor.

"Yes," answered Mom.

Then the doctor said, "A clean teaspoon please."

She came up to me and asked me to open my mouth. I opened my mouth. The doctor put a spoon in my mouth and pressed down on my tongue. She put the spoon in much deeper than Dad did yesterday. And that was very unpleasant. She asked me to say "ah." When I said "ah," she looked at my throat and sat back down at the table.

The doctor opened her briefcase, took out a blank prescription form, and wrote out a prescription for aspirin. "To get the fever down," she said. Then she filled in a release slip for Mom and said, "I'll see you in my office in three days." And started to the door.

Mom and Dad walked her out. And when they returned, they began to laugh. I asked them why they were laughing. Mom tried to say something but could not because they started to laugh again.

Finally, Mom said that as the doctor was leaving, she turned to Mom and said, "Give something warm to your daughter to drink."

And Dad said to Mom that he realized he had been wrong. Because he had been unable to predict everything that the doctor would do.

## *A Silver Half-Ruble*

In early spring, as soon as we can find a piece of pavement clean of snow and ice, we play different coin games: Coin Wall, Treasury, Flip Over, and Catch Up.

In Catch Up, we just throw the coin by hand. I have an advantage in this game. My fingers are pretty long. So it is easy for me to cover my coin and someone else's with my fingers. This means that I "ate" the other coin. And the owner of the other coin pays me one kopeck.\*

All yards have different rules for Catch Up. Our rules are the strictest. When you throw the coin, you cannot bend over. And you need to throw the coin while your hand is no lower than your chest.

And although I often win at this game, I cannot say that I like to play it. Because you need to find a large clean space in order to play this game. And we certainly do not have much of that. And I do not really feel like playing in the dirt. Especially because some of us like to throw the coin right where there is a lot of dirt. And I do not think it is much of a game then.

For Flip Over, you do not need a lot of dry ground. But here a lot depends on the coin itself.

In Flip Over, the most important thing is who will be the first to break the stack. Everyone throws the coin from some distance to the line. The closer your coin lands to the line, the better. But the coin must go over the line, otherwise it is going

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\* One kopeck is the smallest Russian coin. For comparison: the cost of a local call from a public phone was 15 kopecks at that time.

to be considered a short fall. The one who throws the best is the first to start the game. He will be the first to break up the pile of coins stacked on the ground.

A good, heavy coin flies nicely, and when it falls, it does not roll anywhere. It is also easier to break up the pile with it. When you strike with a regular five-kopeck coin, it is difficult to flip over another coin. A coin can most likely be flipped over by a heavier coin. As soon as a coin is flipped, it is collected by the one who flipped it over.

Once I saw someone playing with a medal. And I realized that this was it! A medal was what I needed.

And I asked my dad to give me his medal. But when my dad found out what I needed his medal for, he said, "Are you out of your mind? If anyone sees you playing with my medal..."

And I immediately understood that what I said was stupid. Of course, Dad was absolutely right. If anyone saw me playing with the medal, Dad and I would be sent to prison. Mom would probably be sent to prison too. And I decided to tell the guy who played with a medal not to do that anymore. But after that, I never saw that guy again.

So, I have never had a chance to have a good coin. That is why I do not like to play Flip Over. However, I do like to play Coin Wall and Treasury. For these games, you only need a really small patch of dry ground near the wall of a building. And a regular silver half-ruble is the best type of coin for these games.

In Coin Wall and Treasury, everything depends only on you. You really have to know what to do with your silver half-ruble. Otherwise, nothing good can come out of it. Before you make your shot, you need to tap over the entire wall and find the spot where the sound is high pitched. Because spots where the sound is low pitched are hollow. And then your half-ruble will fall straight down to your feet. But if you find a good spot on the wall, your silver coin will fly far away, in the direction you want.

Coin Wall is similar to Catch Up. The only difference is that you are playing against the wall. The rest of the rules are

the same. Having long fingers helps me in this game as well. Because here you also need to cover over your coin and someone else's with the fingers of your hand. And you have to prove that you have a strong hold on the coin and that it would be impossible to strike it out from under your fingers with another coin.

Treasury is pretty much like Coin Wall. But in Coin Wall, when you "eat" someone, he pays you one kopeck. In Treasury, this kopeck goes into a treasury box. We draw a treasury box on the asphalt with chalk. Not too big and not too small – about the size of my palm. If you land a coin within the treasury box, all the money is yours.

Moms usually do not let their kids gamble. But my mom lets me play.

Once, I heard someone asking my mom why she let me gamble. And my mom replied, "It's better to let my child gamble than..." She did not finish her sentence, but it was obvious what she wanted to say. Because we have such games that adults are scared to even watch us play.

Today I went out to the yard early and had enough time to play both Coin Wall and Treasury. And even a little bit of Catch Up.

And as we were playing Catch Up, a boy we did not know walked up to us. He lives somewhere not far from us. But I do not know where exactly. I am sure, though, that he does not live on Panteleyevka. Because the boys that come here from Panteleyevka scare even our guys. But when I looked at this boy, I immediately realized that he was not someone to be afraid of. His parents must have come to visit somebody who lived in our yard. And then they let him go out and play for a short while. He was looking at what we were doing and kept talking to us all the time.

First, he said that he also could play Catch Up and that he had a very good coin. His coin was so big that it did not just "eat" other coins, it "ate" them with a bang. Then my friend Gleb Paramonov asked him to play with us.

And I knew why Gleb asked him to play with us. Because Gleb is awesome at throwing against a big coin from a distance. And if the one who has the big coin throws it and misses, then Gleb easily catches him with a bang; so that his coin hits the big coin. And for this, the loser pays double.

That was why Gleb suggested that the boy play with us. But the boy refused to play. He stood there and just looked at us playing. And the whole time he kept talking.

It was very strange and unusual to hear the boy talk all the time. In our yard, nobody likes it when someone talks a lot. No one talks a lot in our yard.

That was why it seemed very strange and unusual to me that this boy kept saying things all the time. And I could feel that everyone, absolutely everyone, was set against him.

Gleb again asked this boy to play Catch Up with us. But the boy said that, first, he did not have his coin on him and, second, he liked to play other games.

Then Gleb asked him what other games he liked to play. And the boy said that he was very good at knives. Well, then I suggested that we all play knives.

I am pretty good at playing knives. "Grandma," "Grandpa," "First Finger," "Second Finger" – that I learned quickly. So now I do not lose in this game. I mean, I am never the last one, the loser.

I lost only once. It was a long time ago. I was lucky that back then none of the older boys played with us. And since there were no older boys, the match was not pounded in too deeply. And to get it out of the sand with my teeth was not that difficult. But when older boys are involved, everything becomes much harder.

Usually we play knives in the kids' sandbox. But the sand, if it was even there, had been mixed in with soil and dirt long time ago. So we use this mix of soil and dirt to make a pile that we throw our knives into.

When the game is over, whoever finished first pounds a match into the pile with three hits. Usually, the first hit is enough to fully pound the match into the pile. After the second

hit, it sinks deep into the middle of the pile. The third hit is made not on the match itself but right onto the pile, from the side. Which makes it very difficult to tell where the match actually is. The loser has to get the match out with his teeth. He is allowed to help himself only with his chin. And to look at someone who is trying to get the match out with his teeth is, at times, just pitiful.

When I proposed for everyone to go and play knives and looked at the boy inquiringly, Gleb waved his hand and said, "This one can't do anything." And thus the boy had no other choice but to follow us to the sandbox.

The sandbox was still half covered in snow. But we managed to make the pile somehow and started to play "Grandma-Grandpa." And the boy began to play "Grandma-Grandpa" with us. And of course he lost.

And after he lost, he began to hop around the sandbox on one leg. Apparently, where he lived, that was the punishment for those who lost playing knives - to jump around the sandbox on one leg.

At this point we started to laugh so hard that we could not stop. The boy started to laugh with us. And because of that, it was even funnier. Some of us even fell to the ground from laughing so hard. When we finally stopped laughing, we explained to him what he had to do.

And then he was very scared and wanted to run away. But we caught him and started to force him to do what he had to do. When he realized that he would not be able to wiggle out of doing it, he tried to find the match with his teeth. We felt sorry for him and told him that he could help himself with his chin. So in the end, he found the match.

He found the match and ran away. And we just stood there, laughing and remembering how he hopped on one leg around the sandbox. Why we found it so funny, I cannot explain. But nothing funnier has happened in my life so far.

## *An Ink Pencil*

This time before the holidays, the only thing everyone talked about was whether or not they would be selling flour. Everyone talked about this because a rumor was going around that they would not be selling flour this time. And only a few days ago, there was another rumor that they would sell flour. And everyone was really happy.

When my dad heard this news, he said, "This is to make our life even merrier."<sup>\*</sup> And Mom, of course, gave him THE look but did not say anything to him. But she told me that they would only sell one pack of flour per person. Therefore, she was going to take me with her to get two packs of flour.

I hate having to stand in line with Mom. So I tried to tell Mom that one pack might be just enough for us. But Mom sternly replied that I had to go with her to the store and that I should stop whining and that she would try not to torture me for too long.

She said that I should go with her to the store in the morning and stay in line until they gave me a number. Then I would be on my own. But Mom would continue to stand in line. And as her turn would near, she would run out to get me, and I would just have to come and get the pack of flour.

Mom also warned me that we would have to wake up early in order to get to the store before it opened. If we came to the store before it opened, then we would be done earlier.

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\* The father of the boy was obviously making fun of some propaganda slogan of that time.

I asked Mom whether we still had any jam left from last year. Because when Mom bakes something out of flour, I like to top that "something" with a bit of jam. But Mom said that we had run out of jam. Then I said that since we were buying flour, maybe it made sense to also buy some jam.

But Mom said that, first of all, she had not seen jam sold in stores for a long time, second, it was very expensive to buy jam in the store, and third, she was going to make jam herself this summer.

In the morning we went to the store. Though we did not go as early as Mom had planned. But we still got there before the store opened. A pretty big crowd had already gathered. And Mom blamed me for taking so long to get ready, because they had already started to give out the numbers.

Soon it was our turn. Well, it was our turn to get numbers written on our palms. Numbers were being written by some woman with dark blue lips. She put the ink pencil in her mouth, moistened the pencil, and wrote a number on the palm of an old man who was standing in front of my mom.

Then she again moistened her pencil and wrote a number on Mom's palm. Then she moistened her pencil one more time and wrote a number on my palm.

I asked my Mom what was the purpose of the ink pencil and who invented it and why.

And Mom said that she had no idea who invented it or why. She had never thought about it. And maybe, the ink pencil was invented just for writing numbers on palms.

Mom asked me to go home and do all my homework. And she said that later, after we bought flour, I could go out and play.

Mom warned me not to go out of the house. And when I asked why, she replied that she did not want to look for me in all those junkyards that I loved so much. She also told me that I should not even think about getting my hands dirty and God forbid I should wash them, otherwise the number on my palm might wash off.

I ran home to do my homework. And literally in an hour, Mom came back. I was very glad that she came back so soon. But Mom said that they decided to form a group of six people within the line, so that only two people from the group would have to remain on duty by the store to make sure that our numbers were still on the list.

And Mom said that she had to return to the line by one o'clock and that we were really lucky because the roll-call would start at one o'clock and we could go there together.

At twelve thirty, Mom said it was time to go for the roll-call. So we went. However, everything turned out to be different from the way Mom thought it would be. First of all, it was very hard to find our group of people in line. Second, two hours prior, someone had conducted another roll-call, and as a result, Mom and I were crossed off the list.

Mom started to argue why they had conducted extra roll-call. And everyone who came back at one o'clock became angry for being removed from the list. There was a big scandal there. Everyone was yelling something. And it was all very funny.

And just then a rumor started going around that if you paid three rubles to the cashier in the store then you could buy flour from the store's back door, without waiting in line. But Mom said that she was not about to pay anything to anyone.

Finally, everyone in line agreed that all those who were present at one o'clock would be put back on the list. And Mom said that we were lucky that there were a lot of people like us. That was why people in the line agreed to put our names back on the list.

Also Mom said that it was fortunate that they did not throw out the old list. They just crossed off our numbers.

During the roll-call at one o'clock, they created a new list. After about an hour, Mom's number and my number were restored on the new list. And Mom said that I could go home but she would stay until the end and not go anywhere.

In the evening, Mom ran home to get me. It turned out that while I was doing my homework, there were two more roll-

calls. But Mom did not come for me because everyone in the line decided that one person could mark for two.

We went back to the store once again. This time, everything turned out to be fine. We got two packs of flour just before the store closed. And Mom said that we were lucky because if in the morning we had come half an hour later, there would have been nothing left for us. And that those who could come tomorrow morning would create a new list. They would guard this list all night. And Mom said that this would be a whole different story. Because whether or not the flour would be available for sale tomorrow was still up in the air.

Of course, I was very happy that everything worked out so well for us. But what made me especially happy was the fact that my mom was happy. And she really was happy that the day was not wasted.

After the story with the flour, there were a few times when I remembered the ink pencil and wondered again who invented it and why. I did not believe that it was invented just to write numbers on palms.

And I remembered that someone once told me that after the war, our soldiers brought from Germany a lot of ladies' nightgowns. At the time, no one thought of them as nightgowns. And women started wearing them, thinking that they were dressing up. For example, they wore them when going to the theater.

And now I think that the same story happened with the ink pencils. They probably came to us from a place where they were used for some very important purpose. But here no one knew about that. Then people just started to use them to write numbers on the palms of people waiting in line. It just fit the purpose.

## *The Hole*

When I grow up, all of my clothes will be nice and without holes. And very often I dream about the day when I will not have a single hole anywhere. Nowhere – not a single hole.

I thought about holes today because my Mom mended the back of my pants. And when Mom finished, we decided to check whether it was visible that my pants had been mended. Mom thought that nobody could see the stitching. But I did not agree with her. So Mom said that she would put the iron on the gas stove, iron the pants, and then nobody would be able to see the stitching.

And so, Mom put the iron on the stove. And when the iron heated up and Mom ironed the stitching, she told me, “You see? It is not noticeable at all.” And I agreed with her. But I agreed with Mom only because I did not want to upset her. I did not want to tell her that the stitching was still very obvious.

Needless to say that mended pants always look mended. And the most important thing in this story is that the hole was right on my behind.

And a hole on the behind is the most disgraceful hole in the world. No hole could be worse than that.

For example, what can you say about a hole in the sleeve? You can only dream about such a hole. Well, of course it depends on where on the sleeve your hole is. If, for example, the hole is on the elbow, then it is, surely, the next worst hole after the hole on the behind. A hole on the elbow means that you wore the jacket so long that the elbows wore out.

It is much better when a hole is at the end of the sleeve. Then it could just be that you were not too careful about wearing the jacket and the sleeves wore out. But the jacket itself is really not old at all.

The best hole is one that is close to the shoulder. That might mean that you accidentally caught your jacket on a nail somewhere and that is why you have a hole. But overall, your jacket is as good as new. So this hole is not really a hole at all.

The hole in my pants, the one on my behind, started to wear out a long time ago. And I kept my eye on it. Once Mom noticed that I was looking at it and offered to mend it even then. But I did not let her do it. Because when a hole is mended, it is a completely different thing than when it is not.

If a hole is not stitched over, then you can always pretend that you have no idea it is there. And if someone happens to notice your hole and tell you about it, you can just pretend that you do not really care about it since your parents are going to buy you new pants soon.

But if a hole is mended, it means that everyone knew about it long, long ago. It also means that no one is going to buy you new pants anytime soon. Because if your parents were going to buy you new pants anytime soon, no one would bother mending the hole.

And now, because of this mended hole on my behind, I will always have to think which way to turn. I will never be able to forget about it.

It is especially annoying because just recently Mom bought me a new pair of shoes. I was overjoyed when Mom bought new shoes for me. Because I did not have to worry, as I did with my old shoes, that someone would see that they were completely worn out to the point of having huge holes in them. With new shoes, I was able to run as much as I wanted and kick up my feet in any which way possible.

And it made me so happy that sometimes I thought it was too good to be true. And from time to time I had dreams that my shoes, once again, had huge holes in them. But when I woke

up, it was always so wonderful to realize that it was only a bad dream.

Now everything is backwards. When I wake up in the morning, my first thought is: "What if my pants are not really mended and this was just a bad dream?" But then, unfortunately, it dawns on me that it was not a dream.

And I often lie in bed for several minutes with my eyes closed and think about the time when I will be grown up. I have no doubt that I will not have holes in my clothes. But how it will happen, that my clothes will not have any holes, I do not yet know.

## *Anton*

In our yard, there is a boy. His name is Anton. He is one year older than I am. On the one hand, there is nothing special about him. But on the other hand, all the boys treat him differently from everyone else.

For example, if he is not outside, then everyone asks about him and wonders where Anton is and why he has not shown up. When he shows up, all the boys immediately gather around him. Once, when I decided not to do that, I found myself alone. So in the end I had no choice but to join everybody.

For whatever reason, it is up to Anton to decide what we do and what games we play. If he says "Let's go!" then everyone follows him. Not everyone knows where he is running to. Nevertheless, if he says "Let's go!" then everyone, immediately, and without thinking, starts to run after him.

This does not mean that no one else has good ideas. But if someone does have an idea, this "someone" will most likely ask Anton what he thinks about it. And Anton decides whether this idea is good or not. And the same question keeps spinning around in my head all the time, "Why is Anton always the one in charge? Why is it always him and only him?"

Once I told Anton that it would be a good idea to play soccer. And I have to say that Anton often agrees with me when I suggest something. And I think I know why.

Anton has a sister, Lisa. She and I are in the same class. And once Anton told me that Lisa mentioned something about me. He did not tell me exactly what she said. But I think that Lisa told him something good about me. Because after that,

Anton started to be much nicer to me. Well, he began to take notice of me. Before, he just never noticed I was there.

So, when I suggested playing soccer, Anton seemed to agree with me. But before he had the opportunity to yell out his usual "Let's go!" I asked him why he was always the one to take charge. Maybe I should be the one to yell out "Let's go!", especially since it was my idea to play soccer in the first place.

And I thought Anton would never agree to that. Because so far, no one other than Anton had ever yelled "Let's go!" And I was ready to argue with him and tell him that it was unfair that he and only he was always in charge. But to my surprise, Anton was very indifferent to my suggestion. He did not bother to argue with me but simply told me to go ahead and take charge.

Immediately after he told me this, I realized that it was not so easy. It was not easy to suddenly yell out "Let's go!" Apparently, you sort of had to prepare yourself and only then yell "Let's go!"

So, I readied myself and shouted, "Let's go!" and no one even thought to run. I started to ask everyone why they did not run. But Anton asked me why I, myself, did not run.

And it was only then that I realized that I was doing everything wrong. Anton, when he yelled out his "Let's go!" ran himself. But when I yelled, I had remained still in the same spot. And since I remained standing in the same spot, no one ran either.

Then I again yelled, "Let's go!" and started to run. But again, no one followed me. And I felt very embarrassed, and it seemed to me that even Anton felt embarrassed for me. And everyone felt embarrassed.

I did not know what I could do. Finally, I told Anton that he should be the one in charge. And I think Anton was glad to hear me say that, and he right away suggested that we would play soccer.

Everyone, of course, agreed with him. But for some reason, Anton asked me personally whether or not I agreed with him.

And I replied that I did. Then Anton yelled out "Let's go!" and everyone followed him. And I was the first to follow him. And no more questions spun around in my head anymore.

## *The Irregular Verb*

Our English teacher is kind of nuts. She is very strange and funny. She never comes to our classroom, wearing the same outfit. I do not know what she wears on the days when we do not have English. But for our classes, she always has something different on. Well, of course, not everything, but something is always different.

At first, I thought that our English teacher tore the clothes she had worn before. And since she tore them, she had to wear something else. But later she put on again what she had worn before. Then I thought that maybe she just mended what she tore.

But the situation repeated itself several times. Then I told Anton about it. But Anton said that he saw nothing strange in this and that she just washed one while wearing the other.

For me, this explanation sounded just plain funny. First, did it mean that she washed all of her stuff every several days? And, second, did she wash her skirt as well? Is it even possible to wash a skirt?

Once I saw our English teacher on the street. She was walking with someone, hand in hand. And I noticed that she was walking with one of the boys from our school. He was a senior – about to graduate.

Why and where she was taking him, I did not know.\* But she was wearing an absolutely amazing scarf. And she did not

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\* Romantic relations between students and young teachers were (and probably are) quite common in Russian schools.

have it on because it was cold outside. She had it on just because it was pretty. And the scarf, it seemed, was very fine and delicate. I thought so because it fluttered even in a slight breeze. And it was very bright. There were lots of red, yellow and other colors on it – and I had never seen such colors on clothes before.

Today, when our English teacher came to our classroom, she was wearing that bright scarf I had already seen on her once in the street. And so she entered the classroom, sat at her desk, opened the grade-book, and said, “Now, the lesson will be recited by...”

She started running her finger down the grade-book. While she was doing that, there was a dead silence in the classroom. Well, during moments like these, there is always a dead silence.

Those of us who had not been called on for a long time quieted down because, first of all, they did not want to attract the teacher’s attention to themselves and, second, because they were leafing through their book, trying to memorize something at the last minute.

Those who had been called on recently also quieted down. Because if they had been recently called on, then they would not be called on again. And since they knew that, they had not studied at all. And so they were especially worried.

And here our English teacher kept looking at the grade-book, going over and over the names with her finger, and finally said, “The lesson will be recited by Pudovkin.”

And everyone was happy that Pud was called on. Everyone was happy because Pud desperately needed to get his grades up. Otherwise, his mother would kill him for his two.\*

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\* A two is a non-passing grade in the Russian “two to five” school grading system, comparable to an F in the American grading system. A three is a minimum passing grade. A four is a good passing grade. A five is the highest grade, comparable to an A in the American grading system.

Pud asked our English teacher to call on him many times. But the English teacher just kept telling him that there was no point in calling on him since he did not know anything. And Pud usually said that he still had to get his grades up and that he had studied everything.

So the English teacher called on Pud at last. He slowly went up to the blackboard. When he reached the blackboard, the English teacher asked him to write out the new irregular verbs that had been assigned for us to study.

Pud took the chalk and got ready to write something on the blackboard. He had some cheat-sheets prepared. But he could not figure out which cheat-sheet he needed to use.

The English teacher, who usually never allowed anyone to use cheat-sheets, did not say a word to Pud. Though we all understood that she saw how he was trying to read something from his cheat-sheets. She did not ask him to put away the cheat-sheets and did not say anything at all. She just silently waited to see how this thing was going to end. And, of course, she knew perfectly well that Pud's mom would kill him if he got a two again.

After about twenty minutes there was still nothing written on the blackboard. Then the English teacher declared that she had no choice but to, again, give him a two. And Pud said that he had studied everything.

To that of course, it was expected that the English teacher would say what all teachers said in such cases, "I'm not interested in what you have been studying. I'm interested in what you have learned." But she just told Pud that he did not have to write anything new. She just asked him to write any irregular verbs in three forms.

Pud again tried to remember something. He wanted to remember something but could not. Then the English teacher asked him to name only one irregular verb in three forms.

She said that if Pud named any irregular verb, only one irregular verb in three forms, then she would immediately give him a three.

Here I decided that it was time for me to help Pud out. So I whispered, "To put, put, put."

And everyone started to laugh. Everyone laughed because it turned into a very dangerous game of words for Pud. It had a very obvious hint to both his last name and to his fists, heavy as a pood.

The English teacher again said, "Any irregular verb, Pudovkin."

And again I whispered, "To put, put, put."

And other kids whispered the same.

Pud, of course, heard everything. But he hated to repeat "To put, put, put." And the English teacher pretended that she had heard nothing. She repeated that she swore to give Pud a three if he named any irregular verb in three forms.

At this point, everyone in our class began to chant, "To put, put, put. To put, put, put."

Our English teacher could not stand it anymore and said sternly, "Quiet!" This she said to everyone. And then – only to Pud, "Come on, Pudovkin, please."

Pud reddened as he had never reddened before. He reddened very much and said, "To put, put, put."

And then rang the bell.

Everyone jumped up. The English teacher attempted to stop us and have everyone return to their seats. But she could not do anything. She then shouted, "Pudovkin, I give you a three!" And everyone came up to Pud and patted him on the shoulder. Pud was very happy. He smiled. And I think it was the first time I saw Pud smile.

But I did not go up to congratulate Pud. And I did not pat him on the shoulder or anything like that. Because my hint was very doubtful. And who knew how it would turn out for me. Because, you know, Pud's fists were as heavy as a pood.

## *The Scooter*

I built a scooter. Really, I never actually thought I would be able to build it. It all happened because I found two bearings on the Trifonovka junkyard.

Honestly, I love to search through junkyards and dumps. My mom once said that whenever I pass by a dump, I always examine it with an inquisitive look.

Well, we all love to go to Trifonovka. And we do not go there for something specific. If you need something specific, you will never find it there. But sometimes you find unimaginable things at Trifonovka.

Boys from all regions of Moscow go to the Trifonovka junkyard. We are just lucky that it is so close to us.

Before I found the bearings at Trifonovka, I did not even intend to make a scooter. Actually, no one in our yard has a scooter. But somehow everyone knows how to build it and what spare parts are needed.

And as soon as I found these bearings, it immediately became clear that there was nothing left to do but to make a scooter.

Of course, everyone began to tell me what else I needed to find. I had to find two wooden boards, a round stick for the handle, a piece of tin sheet, several nails, and two short metal pipes that would fit into the bearings.

My friend Gleb Paramonov said that I would need a lot of tools but that I would have no chance of getting them. He said that I would need a hammer, a drill with drill bits, scissors to cut metal, and a knife.

And I told Gleb not to be a wise guy. Of course, it is very easy to nail things with a hammer. But a stone would work just as well. You can make any hole, using a nail and a small knife. Actually, a knife is what you really need. It is not really possible to do anything without it. Scissors to cut metal are not really necessary either. If you just keep bending the tin back and forth many times on the same spot, then it will break on its own.

It took me a couple of months to collect all the parts. But it only took me a few days to put the scooter together. But I did not like how the whole story with the scooter turned out. And here is why I did not like it.

It was no fun to ride alone. Therefore, everyone in our yard took turns riding my scooter. And everyone tried to go nearly all the way to the end of our street and then speeded downward. The scooter broke very often. And I was the only one repairing it.

But it was not because the one who broke it refused to repair it. Not at all. Usually everyone started to repair it with great enthusiasm. And always told me, "Don't worry. We'll have it fixed in no time." But it always ended up that something stood in the way of finishing the repair. Either I or the one who was helping me with repairs needed to go home. Or else there were not enough nails. Or something else.

Finally, I gave my scooter to Gleb. And when I gave it to him, I said, "Gleb, take it and ride it whenever you want. And don't worry about its wheel being broken - it's nothing. I'll help you right now, and we'll have it fixed in no time."

## *American Stewed Meat*

The war ended a long time ago, but adults still remember about it all the time. When they get together in our room, they immediately start remembering about how things were during the war. And they talk about the same things over and over again.

Actually, no one talks about the war itself. Everyone only remembers how they lived during the war. And no one talks about the war itself because there is no one around to talk about it: some were still too young and others were too old to be drafted. And in our room, I have never seen those whose age was just right for the draft.

Only my dad could tell how things were in the war. But he says nothing to our guests. Once when I asked him to tell me, he said that it was nothing like what they showed in the movies.

Dad told me that everyone was afraid that he might be killed. Everyone had a single thought: whether or not he would be killed. On the whole, it was really scary there.

When I asked Dad whether he was scared that he might be killed, he said that he too was really scared. But he said that everyone was scared in different ways. For example, once he was put in charge of safeguarding an officer of the command staff. And as they began to walk, the officer lay down on his stomach and crawled the whole way. And Dad said that he felt very embarrassed for this officer.

I remember asking my dad whether or not he killed anyone. And my dad said that once he had a chance to kill someone. In those days, no one could be certain which

buildings were occupied by the Russians and which ones, by the Germans. And it just so happened that looking down through the window Dad spotted some Germans. They were very close to him. Dad grabbed his rifle. But it was full of sand, and Dad could not do anything with it. Then Dad grabbed another rifle, but it was also full of sand.

Once Dad told me that he dragged his wounded commander to the hospital. And as Dad was dragging him, he thought that the commander got shot again. But Dad was not sure about that.

When he finally brought his commander to the hospital, Dad was highly praised and was promised a medal. Because they gave out medals for things like that. But for some reason, he was not given that medal.

Mom says that Dad was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. She says that because we have never heard of anyone coming back from Stalingrad alive. But Dad did come back from Stalingrad. But later he was drafted again.

I once heard Mom telling our guests that before the very end of the war, letters from my dad stopped coming for a few months. Mom did not know what to think. It was already May of forty-five, and still there was nothing from my dad. On the eighth of May, our neighbor told Mom that the war was over. He was angry that the whole world knew about it but we did not. Mom did not know whether to believe him or not and went to sleep.

Early in the morning, she was awoken by three doorbell rings. Three rings meant that someone was coming to see us. Mom did not go to open the door because it was still very early in the morning. At such an early hour, it could only be the milkwoman, who sold us milk.

Then Mom heard that our neighbor went to open the door. And suddenly our neighbor yelled, "Oo-ooh!" And Mom said that at that moment, she understood everything and bolted out into the corridor. That was exactly what she said, "I bolted out into the corridor." And it was my dad.

There is another story that Mom sometimes tells our guests. She tells about the time she went to the market to sell Dad's coat.

She went to the market to sell Dad's coat because there was nothing left for us to eat. It was the first time that my mom went to sell something. She was very nervous. Even though everyone was telling her not to worry, "Everyone does it. It's not a big deal."

And so Mom went to sell the coat. She was standing there for a long time, afraid to offer the coat to anyone. And she kept repeating to herself that she should be brave because everyone sold things and no one worried.

Then Mom saw a young man. This young man seemed very nice. So, Mom found the courage to approach this young man and said, "Sir, do you need a coat? I have one for sale."

Here, this young man reached into his pocket and showed Mom his ID. When he did this, Mom's knees began to shake and her vision became blurry. Even though she did not understand what kind of ID it was.

The young man asked Mom harshly where she got the coat. And Mom answered that the coat belonged to her husband and that her husband was at the front. The young man said that he was assigned to keep watch on the market in order to catch all bandits and crooks like my mom.

Then he asked my mom what she would tell her husband about his coat when he returns from the front. At this point, Mom could no longer stand it and began to cry. And as she cried, she told the young man that she would somehow figure things out with her husband herself. And the young man finally let my mom go.

Later, Mom was always surprised that just about everybody sold just about everything at the market. But for whatever reason, she was the only one who got caught. After that, she never went to the market to sell anything again.

As for the coat that Mom tried to sell, it hung in our closet unused for a long time. It was only recently that Mom took it

out, unpicked and turned it, did something else, and made a very fashionable coat for herself. And everyone kept asking her where she found such good cloth.

Mom also told our guests that during the war she was given two pieces of rye bread per day. She ate one piece and kept the second piece for the next day. At this moment of her story, Mom always paused. Because she knew that someone would definitely ask her why she received two pieces of bread.

And someone would ask her, and she would reply that one piece of bread she received for herself and the other for her child. "But the child did not need it because I (this my mom said about herself) – because I was nursing him (this was about me)."

So she hid the second piece of bread in our wardrobe in order to prepare a sort of feast for herself for the next day, meaning to eat all three pieces of bread at once. But after she hid the bread, she kept constantly thinking about it.

She kept thinking about that piece of bread, which she had saved for the next day. And she took it from the wardrobe and looked at it. And as she looked at it, this piece of bread began to seem uneven. So then Mom cut around the edges of the bread to make it more even. Whatever she cut, she ate and put the remaining piece back in the wardrobe.

Then Mom took it out of the wardrobe again. And again it seemed uneven and she thought that she did not trim the edges well enough. So she cut it again. And she continued doing this until she finished her second piece of bread.

There was another story that my mom told once. When we returned to our apartment after the evacuation, it turned out that all the locks on all the doors had been broken. And when Mom opened the door to our room, she saw that the room was empty. Not even a single chair was left.

And she began to cry because she did not know what to do. Then someone told her that she should rummage through other apartments in our building and see whether the neighbors had any of our furniture.

At first, Mom doubted that anyone would allow her to search through their apartment. She asked, "What am I supposed to say when they open their door? I beg your pardon, I want to check whether you have stolen anything from me?" But Mom was told not to worry too much about what she should say. In those days everyone did things like that.

So Mom went around the building to the other apartments. She knocked on the neighbors' doors and asked them to let her in to see whether, by chance, they had some of our furniture.

I believe that in the very first apartment she went to, Mom saw our wardrobe. She asked the neighbor whose wardrobe it was. The neighbor answered, "How should I know whose wardrobe it is?" Then Mom said that it was our wardrobe. And the neighbor said, "If it's yours, then take it."

In another apartment, an elderly woman opened the door. Mom noticed immediately that the woman was wearing her blouse. Mom said that it was her blouse. The elderly woman took off the blouse and returned it to my mom.

This way my mom managed to salvage a lot of our stuff. However, she said that she did not feel comfortable having to go through other people's apartments. And she especially felt uncomfortable when she found some of our stuff.

All our guests also shared many stories. They recall how they used to stoke up their small metal heater with firewood. And how they placed the exhaust pipe out the window. They recall how and where they got the firewood. And how they stoked up their heater with not only firewood but whatever else they could find.

There would always be someone who would recall how they boiled water in a glass, using two shaving blades. But because it has been more than ten years since the war ended, this someone starts to forget when exactly they boiled water with the blades - during the war or after. Once someone described how he had been taught to steal electricity. You just need to connect one wire to the steam radiator, and then nothing would register on the meter.

Most definitely, they would talk about the Germans; how cruel they were and what horrid things they did. And of course they would recall how Germans made soap out of human bodies and wrote on this soap that it was made out of humans.

Once Mom's brother grinned and asked who would buy that soap, knowing it was made out of humans. And immediately everyone started to ask, "What do you mean? What do you mean?" And my mom's brother replied that he meant nothing by it.

Our guests might be a little envious of those who were wounded slightly during the war since the government promised to them certain privileges for that. But if someone gets envious of the invalids of the war, then there would be someone who would say that it was better to live without any privileges than to be handicapped.

Mom's brother once said that war veterans were being gradually evicted from Moscow so that they would not spoil the city's scenery. But someone objected, saying that the invalids were evicted not from Moscow but only from the central part of Moscow.

Sometimes someone would say that our allies were unreliable. And everyone would start remembering when they promised to open the Second Front and when they actually opened it.

Usually after that, everyone would get quiet for a moment. And I knew what was on everyone's mind at that time. Because someone would, most certainly, say something nice about the allies. And as soon as someone said it, everyone would immediately agree and say something nice about the allies too. They would, of course, talk about the Lend-Lease a lot. And finally, everyone would agree that without American stewed meat, we all would have died of starvation.

There would always be someone who would recall the Siege and say that during the Siege people ate cats and rats. Even though not one of our guests has ever seen anyone who lived through the Siege.

And once someone said that during the Siege mothers ate their children. And my mom's brother said that this did not happen during the Siege but in the year nineteen-twenty-nine and again, later, in forty-six. And to that, everyone started to say "Sh-sh! What are you talking about?" And my mom said to her brother, "Don't say these things so loud. Our neighbors might hear."

And I wonder why it is so - the war ended a long time ago but adults still think about it all the time. Why is it that as soon as they get together in our room, they start remembering about how things were during the time of war? Why do they talk about the same things over and over again?

And here is what I also do not understand. I tried American stewed meat once. Of course it was very tasty. And this stewed meat was not at all like regular meat. It was ten times better than regular meat.

And I wonder why Americans sent this tasty meat to us. During the war, they could have sent us any old junk. So then why did they send us the tastiest food they had? They could have sent us what did not like. We would have eaten it anyway.

## *Endless “Freeze!”*

Closer to summer time, the streets begin to dry from snow and rain, and we can play many different games. Girls love to play Jump Rope, with one rope and with two. They play Hide and Seek, Tag, and Freeze Tag. But I never look at what the girls play and how they play.

And if I happen to see them play, I immediately walk away because I have no interest in their games. If I were interested in that, I would be teased mercilessly and that would be pretty much the end of my life in our yard. That is why I am not interested in what and how they play.

But they are always playing. They love to play different games with a ball: Dodgeball and “Freeze!” They love Hopscotch and another game similar to Hopscotch, one that I could never understand.

But we have our own games. And all of them are pretty brutal. If you are “it” for the first time, it is very likely that you will be “it” for a long time. Maybe even several hours in a row. And you cannot just quit. If you do not get out of being “it” but just quit and run home, then you will be teased for at least a few days. Other boys would shout at you, “Are you out, ugly snout?” and other things like that.

And they might even beat you up. Someone might sneak up on you from behind and throw some rag over your head. And then everyone would start to beat you and then run away. And you would not even know who did that to you.

But it is very difficult to get out of being “it.” Say, you are “it” in Twelve Sticks. Even if you have knocked out seven of the

guys and only have the last one, the eighth, left to knock down, all your hard work could be good for nothing in a minute. And you know this, and you are afraid to go far from the board with the sticks.

But everyone starts to yell, "Don't sit down, go to town!" But just as you move away slightly, this last one, the eighth guy, jumps out from the nearest driveway and knocks over all of your twelve sticks.

And the board with sticks was intentionally placed on top of a small wedge, making a sort of a lever. All the sticks lie on the long end of board. The one who is breaking up the sticks stomps with his foot onto the short end of the board. Because the short end of the board is really very short, the sticks fly very far away. And then you have to pick them all up, put them back onto the board, and then search for everyone again.

Sometimes things turn out to be very frustrating. You notice in a hallway someone wearing a familiar hat. And you know that it is Peter's hat. So you run quickly, happy to knock Peter out. But suddenly, it turns out that it is not Peter but another guy who is wearing Peter's hat, trying to deceive you on purpose.

And they all start to yell, "You are wrong! Bye! So long!" And this not-Peter calmly goes up to the board and breaks up all of your twelve sticks. So you have to collect all the sticks and search for everyone again.

Actually, out of all our games where you have to hide, I like to play Cops and Robbers the most. The only bad thing is that the rules are somewhat unclear.

First, it is not clear where you are allowed to hide. It is only when it comes to Hide and Seek and Twelve Sticks then we have a clear-cut rule to only hide "within the yard." But for Cops and Robbers, there is no such rule. And since there is no such rule, you can go so far that no one will ever find you.

Second, it is not very clear why the ones who are hiding have to draw arrows showing where they are hiding. Third, when they have caught you and start torturing you in order to

find out the password, it is unclear to what extent they can torture you and what is going to happen if you tell them the wrong password.

Also, it is unclear when this game actually ends. And because there are many things that are unclear in this game, the rules change all the time. And I do not like when rules change all the time.

Once, when we were playing Cops and Robbers and we were hiding, we took the tram to get further away. I did not even have a chance to sit down before the conductor hit me on the head with a broom. And my hat fell out onto the pavement.

Conductors do not like it when kids get on the tram because they often do not pay for the ride. I actually always pay, but the conductor, of course, had no way of knowing that.

And so I had to get off at the next stop, walk back, and try to find my hat. It turned out that a policeman picked it up. He asked me how it happened that my hat ended up on the pavement. And I said that the conductor knocked it off with her broom. Then the policeman said that because of my bad behavior, he would take me to the school.

And he did take me to the school, right to the school's assistant principal. And the assistant principal expelled me from school straight away. So Mom had to come to school and sort things out. And afterwards I was allowed to go back to school. But Mom said that she did not like our Cops and Robbers and that I better not leave the yard.

And one of our toughest games is endless "Freeze!" In endless "Freeze!" there is even a greater chance of being "it" for a long time than in Twelve Sticks. In regular "Freeze!" which girls play, you can easily tag someone with a ball. But this is nearly impossible in endless "Freeze!" Because all the boys play with shields and strike your ball away with their bats. And by the time you catch the ball again and yell out "Freeze!"

everyone is already standing about thirty meters away from you covered by their shields.\*

Only girls have a rule that when you yell out "Freeze!" everyone has to freeze on the spot. Girls even try to freeze in weird and funny poses. It is fun for them.

But it is not fun for us. If you are "it," everyone wants to freeze in the most ready-for-battle position.

Even if you yelled "Freeze!" when someone's back was turned to you, this someone, in a split second, would turn to face you and cover himself with a shield. For us, this is considered normal. Well, I mean, it is like part of the rules.

And it is not easy to go through this wall of shields. Especially because everyone is older than you are. Because it always turns out, naturally, that the youngest is always "it."

Nevertheless, it is possible to get out of being "it" in endless "Freeze!" But you have to throw the ball at no one in particular. You need to throw it over all the shields and above everyone's heads. And you have to pretend that you have become absolutely furious and mad. As if you are completely out of your mind. And you have to start yelling something wild and crazy, "Yee-aaa! Son ooofff. Yuuu, aaall of youuu!"

And even this is not enough. Because if you are just pretending that you are out of your mind, nothing is going to happen. You must really be out of your mind.

And you have to run for the ball without stopping. And if you see that someone is going to strike the ball away with his bat, you have to try and catch the ball anyway. And if the guy with the bat was ahead of you and kicked the ball, you should not look to see how far the ball went. Chances are it did not go very far. And you, without stopping or thinking about anything, have to run for the ball again. And the most important thing is that you must yell, yell, yell, and yell.

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\* One meter is a little bit longer than one yard.

Anton taught me this. He told me, “Know this, either you get them or they get you.”

And when I finally succeeded, I realized there was nothing left for me to fear. Now I can do anything I want. Absolutely anything. Because there is nothing in the world that is more difficult than to get out of being “it” while playing endless “Freeze!” in our yard when you are only twelve.

## *The Wardrobe*

Last year we spent the summer in Ukraine. Initially, Mom and Dad wanted us to go to the seaside. But then they found out that everything would be very expensive there. Mom said that the biggest downside would be eating in the cafeterias. And the type of food served there would not be suitable for a child. And that in those cafeterias, even a healthy adult man could get a gastric ulcer.

Mom told Dad that it did not make any sense at all to go to the seaside. But Dad replied that she was saying that because she had never been to the seaside.

I had never seen the sea either, so I asked Dad what is so special about it and why the sea is better than just a river. And Dad said that he did not know how to explain that to me, but the sea is the sea. It cannot be compared to a river. And he would definitely, someday, send me and my mom to the seaside.

We went to Ukraine with Mom's friend Aunt\* Tamara, who also decided to take her son there for the summer. Aunt Tamara told Mom that she spoke Ukrainian and promised to help us if we had any problems with the language.

When we came to Ukraine, a lot of funny things happened. It was funny when we were still sitting on the platform of the railroad station in Kharkov, where we were waiting to transfer to another train. Mom went to buy tickets and left me and Aunt Tamara to watch over our luggage. Then Mom came back and

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\* Russian children often call middle-aged women aunt.

said that she was not sure whether we would be able to buy tickets before nighttime. And she said that she had had trouble finding the building where they sold tickets. And that the number of the building was fourteen.

Mom suggested that Aunt Tamara should write this number down so that it would be easier for her to find it on the way back. But Aunt Tamara said that she did not need to write anything down because it was an easy number to remember. She said that her son was thirteen years old. So all she needed to do was add one to come up with fourteen.

Later that night, Mom put me to sleep on the platform, right on top of our luggage. A man in a uniform walked past us and said, "Hey, why are you sleeping here?"

Aunt Tamara told us later that he was speaking Ukrainian. And that, from that point on, everyone would speak that way. Aunt Tamara translated what he said to us.

But we understood what that man in uniform was saying even without Aunt Tamara's help.

At that moment, Mom became very frightened that he might make us leave and started to explain to him that we were waiting to buy our tickets. But that man continued yelling at us, and then he suddenly walked away and never came back again.

After the man in uniform went away, Aunt Tamara said that we should have given him three rubles and he would have left us alone right away.

And Mom continued to worry that they could still make us leave the platform. But then she calmed down. And Mom and I even started to laugh. We started to laugh because we remembered what the man in uniform had said. Even though we understood him, everything he said sounded weird. All his words sounded strange, and he pronounced everything differently.\*

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\* The Ukrainian language is pretty close to Russian. That is why for many Russians, Ukrainian sounds like broken Russian.

Later Mom told me that, actually, I should not laugh when I hear someone speak differently from the way I do. Because everyone speaks in their own way. "Look," my mom said, "Ukrainians do not laugh at how we speak. Though it probably sounds funny to them too."

After that, Mom told me that she was worried that Aunt Tamara would not remember the number of the building where the tickets were being sold because Aunt Tamara has a bad memory. And her memory is bad because a wardrobe once fell on her head. Since then, she has always a bad memory.

When we finally arrived at our final destination, Mom went somewhere to get our luggage, which we had shipped. But when Mom unpacked our luggage, she found that our tin laundry bucket was all bent. It looked so funny that even Mom began to laugh, though she was really worried about how she would wash everything. So she immediately began to write a letter to Dad. She wrote him about what had happened to our bucket. And she asked him what she should do and how she should do the washing.

And every day, Mom asked our landlord, from whom we rented our room, whether he had received a letter from Dad for us. And when the landlord saw our bucket, he asked Mom what had happened. Mom told him how our bucket was ruined. The landlord said that he could quickly fix it. And he did fix our bucket very quickly.

But Mom still worried about why Dad was not writing back to us. She also worried that Dad would worry about our bucket. Even though there was no need to worry about it anymore.

A letter from Dad came two weeks after we left home. And Mom was very happy that a letter finally came from Dad. She read it a few times to herself and to me.

But it turned out that Dad wrote us this letter one day after we left. And as soon as we realized that, we understood that there would be nothing in this letter about our bucket.

Our neighbors, who rented a room in the same house, also received a letter. They brought it out into the backyard and read it to everyone. And everyone listened because there was a lot about the weather and what was being sold in the stores.

And the neighbors said that they were going to reply about everything that can be bought in the stores in Ukraine and how cheap everything was.

The next day, we received a telegram informing us about a long distance phone call. It was Dad, who placed an order for this call. And Mom said that it was very convenient to be able to send a telegram. Because a letter could have come after we had already left Ukraine. But a telegram came the next day.

And I already knew that mail delivery might take a long time.

Once I heard Mom's brother and Dad complain to each other that it took too long to receive letters. And Mom's brother said that people should not write letters that were interesting for everyone to read. And I asked who was reading these letters. And Mom's brother replied that some day, he would tell me all about it. In a few years. After I grew up a little.\*

And so, on Saturday morning, Mom and I took a bus to the telephone station in the nearby town. We waited there until one o'clock to be connected with Dad.

As soon as we were connected, Mom began to speak with Dad. She was so happy to be speaking with Dad that she began to cry. And I was very surprised that she was crying. And after they talked for a bit, Mom passed me the phone.

I said "Dad?" into the receiver and heard Dad's voice. And I also felt like crying. But I was afraid that Mom would notice, so I was only listening to what Dad was saying and did not reply. Or I just said shortly "yes" or "no." And after a very short time, the telephone operator said that three minutes were

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\* All private mail in Soviet Russia could be opened and inspected by KGB agents.

up and we had to finish our conversation. I heard Dad asking the operator for two more minutes, and then he asked me to give the phone back to Mom.

When Mom finished talking to Dad, she asked me what Dad and I spoke about. But I did not remember what we talked about. I only remembered Dad asking me whether I could hear him okay. I could barely hear him, but I said, "Yes."

And Dad asked me again whether I could hear him okay. I again said, "Yes." After that, I did not hear anything until the telephone operator said that three minutes were up.

I also asked my mom what she spoke about with Dad. But Mom answered that she did not say what she wanted to say because the connection was bad. She could only remember Dad asking her about how we were living here and whether Mom could hear him okay or not.

Then I suggested that Mom order a long distance call with Dad. But Mom said that she would never do that.

"Because it's too expensive?" I asked.

And then Mom said that not only because of that but because she did not want to scare Dad to death.

"Why should Dad be scared to death?" I asked.

And Mom explained that very often they delivered telegrams after midnight. "Wouldn't you get scared if someone knocked on your door after midnight?" asked Mom.\*

And I replied that I would not get scared. But Mom said that I would not get scared because I was still too young.

By then, it was almost two o'clock. Mom went to find out when our bus would leave. When she came back, she said that it would leave at three-forty. She said it in Ukrainian, probably the same way it was said to her. It sounded very funny, but I understood her.

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\* In Soviet Russia, a knock on someone's door in the middle of the night most likely meant an arrest.

And Mom said that since we had to wait for nearly two hours, we might as well try and go to the restaurant that we saw earlier in the same building. "If, of course," my mom added, "it's not too expensive."

A woman who spoke Russian met us at the restaurant's entrance. She told Mom that nobody can take a child into the restaurant. And Mom asked, "Why can't you take a child into the restaurant?" The woman replied, "Don't you understand why? There are many drunks in the restaurant. They're all cursing. Is it right for a child?" And so we left.

And Mom said that we would walk home then. Because walking home would take us no more than an hour and a half. Mom also said that it might easily be that a lot of people from the resort would be on the bus and there would be no place left for us to sit.

So we walked home. And the bus did not pass us. And Mom and I were very happy that the bus did not pass us.

As we were walking home, I asked Mom whether there were usually many drunks in Moscow restaurants. And Mom said that she had never in her life been in a restaurant, neither in Moscow nor in any other city. One time, she and my dad decided to go to a restaurant in Moscow, but the doorman did not even let them touch the door of the restaurant.

Mom said that only foreigners were allowed into Moscow's restaurants. And I, of course, asked Mom, why they only allowed foreigners into Moscow's restaurants. To that Mom said that I should stop asking questions because for such questions, we would end up in prison.

And this is really very interesting. I noticed a long time ago that when I ask one question, Mom usually answers it and does not see anything wrong with it. However, if I ask a second question on the same topic, then it turns out to be the type of question for which we could be sent to prison.

That is why I never ask a second question in school. Well, I never ask the first question either. Because my parents strongly forbid me to ask any questions in school.

Many more interesting and funny things happened in Ukraine. But the most interesting thing happened at the market. At the market you were allowed to bargain.

For example, Mom asked some old woman, "How much are these potatoes?"

And the old woman replied that she was asking four rubles. Then Mom said that she would buy her potatoes for three rubles.

And the old woman said, "Let's do it like this - not for you, not for me - three fifty."

But the most surprising thing was the following. Mom approached an old woman who was selling cherries and asked her how much the bucket of cherries was. The old woman replied that she was asking twelve rubles for a bucket. And here Mom said that she could buy two buckets if the old woman sold each bucket for ten rubles.

At first, I thought that Mom was joking. I thought that Mom would have had to give the old woman three rubles just to be able to buy two buckets instead of one. But surprisingly, the old woman agreed to sell two buckets for twenty rubles.

Mom was very happy, and she told me she had planned in advance to share the cherries with Aunt Tamara. And we would be able to make enough cherry jam to last us the entire winter.

After we left the market, I asked Mom why the old woman agreed to sell two buckets for only twenty rubles instead of twenty-four.

"Don't you understand such simple things?" my mom said. "The more the old woman sells, the more money she earns. Therefore, she wanted to sell as much as possible. She will sell at a lower price if you buy more."

Then I asked why everything is the other way around in stores. In stores they will not sell cheaper if you want to buy more. In stores they will not sell you anything at all if you want to buy more. And of course, Mom was again frightened that we would be sent to prison, so she told me to stop asking questions.

I did not want to argue with Mom, so I stopped talking. But to make me feel better, Mom remembered how two old women had been arguing at the market. They kept yelling at each other something we could barely understand. But somehow it was very funny.

And so, like this, something funny happened every day. Even on the last day, when we were leaving and were already at the bus stop to go to the station, even then something funny happened.

Our landlord ran up to us and gave us a letter from Dad. Mom began to read it to me. Dad wrote that he had received the letter from Mom, in which she wrote about the bucket. And he was asking Mom whether it was possible to ask someone to fix it.

When Mom finished reading this letter to me, we started to laugh and could not stop. And we laughed until our bus came. But as soon as the bus came, we stopped laughing. We stopped laughing because it turned out that there were a lot of people from the resort on the bus and there was no more room left for Mom and me. We were lucky that our landlord had not left yet. He turned out to be a good friend of the bus driver. And then it just so happened that there were seats for us.

Later, when Mom and I were sitting on the bus, Mom told me, "It is a good thing that the landlord brought us Dad's letter in time. Otherwise, we would not have known what to do with the bucket." And again we started to laugh. And we laughed all the way to the station.

We only stopped laughing on the train because Mom started to worry that I had not gained much weight over the summer. And she decided that she would start to give me food with more calories.

On the train, Mom told me that before we left, she decided to check whether Aunt Tamara remembered the number of the building in Kharkov where the tickets were being sold. Mom thought that Aunt Tamara might have forgotten that she should add one to the age of her son to get the number.

When Mom asked Aunt Tamara about the number of the building, Aunt Tamara asked Mom what building number she was talking about. And Mom told her that she was talking about the building in Kharkov where they sold tickets. But Aunt Tamara then asked Mom, "What tickets?"

But Mom did not let me laugh at Aunt Tamara. Because you should not laugh at those whose head was hit by a wardrobe.

## *Proof*

Yesterday, in math class, we were learning what a proof is. Our math teacher said that in mathematics people do not just say things. In mathematics everything must be rigorous. The most important thing in mathematics is proof. And she would tell us what it is.

I had already heard about proofs from different people, but no one could explain it clearly. Only once someone told me that a proof is when someone proves something.

So yesterday I was very happy when I heard that our teacher was going to explain everything to us. And the math teacher told us once again that proof is the most important thing in mathematics. She then added that a proof is when someone proves something. And that if the word "Proof" was written in math books and in textbooks on mathematics, it would then be followed by the actual proof. The teacher also said that everything should be proven rigorously. And that in mathematics no mumble-jumble was allowed.

Then the teacher asked us whether everything was clear or not. And many of us began to nod their heads "yes, all is clear." Then the teacher asked me what I understood about proof. Honestly speaking, I understood nothing. But I answered that a proof is when someone said that a proof would be provided or wrote the word "Proof." Afterwards, the proof would be written.

The teacher asked me, "Is that all?"

I replied that I did not know when it would end, this proof thing.

And the teacher said that I did not understand the most important thing of all, that the proof should be rigorous. If it is not rigorous, then it is not really a proof at all. And again, she asked me whether I understood that or not.

While I was thinking about my answer, someone else in the class raised his hand and asked the teacher how one could know whether the proof was strict or not. The teacher switched her attention to him and said that he did not listen to her at all. And that probably no one was listening to her. After that she repeated everything from the very beginning. But as she was repeating all the same things, I again did not understand anything.

But when the teacher asked everyone, "Is this clear?" all of us together answered, "Clear."

Then the teacher unexpectedly praised me and said that I had posed a very important question. When she praised me, I at first thought she was making fun of me. But it turned out that she was actually quite serious.

She said that mathematicians came up with a way to understand when the proof was completed. In such cases, they would say "which was to be proved." And she said she hoped that from that moment on I too would only provide rigorous proofs and, at the end, would say "which was to be proved." And asked me, "Okay?"

And I replied, "Yes, sure." And I thought to myself, yeah, sure. Right away, I will start to say "which was to be proved." Even without it, I was already teased enough in our yard for my good grades in school.\*

It was a good thing that Anton recently stood up for me. He said that he saw nothing wrong with getting fives in school. And just as things were getting better for me in our yard, our math teacher came up with that.

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\* Being considered an educated person was neither honorable nor safe in Soviet Russia. For this reason, it was a shame to get good grades in school.

And for the rest of the day, I kept thinking about how terrible it would be if at school I ever said "which was to be proved."

And tonight I had a dream that I had already had a few times before. I had a dream that I was "it" in Twelve Sticks. And one of us ran up from behind me and broke up all the sticks. It happens every time I have this dream. But this time, the one who broke up all the sticks walked right up to me very closely, made a terrible grimace, and said, "Which was to be proved."

## *The Old Shoes*

Our summers are short. Real summer lasts only two or three months. And in the summer we often play soccer. In the spring and in the fall, when there is a lot of mud in our yard, we cannot play soccer. That is why in the summer when it is not raining, we try to play soccer as often as we can.

We play soccer in the same spot where we play hockey in winter. And we try to score goals with the same tin can, under the same bench. But still we do not say that we play hockey. In the summer we say that we play soccer.

In the summer it would be better to play with a ball. But none of us has ever had a soccer ball. Therefore we always play with a tin can. And either because of the tin can or because of something else, our shoes suffer greatly. And all of us get into big trouble with our parents.

My mom scolds me for the shoes too. She tells me that shoes simply burn on my feet.

My friend Gleb Paramonov, when his parents bought him a new pair of shoes at the end of last year, did not throw his old ones out. He told me that if he played soccer in his new shoes, his mother would kill him.

At the time when the new shoes were bought for him, his shoe size was thirty-six. So his mom bought him shoes with some room to grow. I mean, size thirty-eight. His old shoes were also bought with some room to grow. At that time his foot size was thirty-four. And the shoes purchased for him were the size thirty-five.

So now, when his feet had grown probably half a size during the winter, he wears shoes that are a size and a half bigger to school and plays soccer in shoes that are a size and a half smaller.

Today, as expected, Gleb came to our yard, wearing his old shoes. He told me that since his shoes were so worn out, they did not hurt him much anymore. But on his heels, he could still feel small lumps under the skin. And he said he was worried that he would have those lumps for the rest of his life.

In our yard, if anyone has a wound, we always discuss whether or not it will leave him with a scar for life. I told Gleb that I had the exact same thing. And that I knew, from my personal experience, that it was not so terrible. These lumps should disappear by themselves in about a year if he never wears tight shoes again. Someone else from our yard also confirmed that the lumps should disappear by themselves. If not in a year then definitely in two or three years – they should disappear.

But Gleb and I did not have a chance to discuss his heels in more detail because suddenly someone showed up in the yard with a real volleyball.

How he came to have a real volleyball, he did not tell us. He just sat on a bench with his volleyball and did not let it leave his hands. He felt bad for his ball. He was worried that his ball might get damaged. We kept asking him to let us play with his ball. And finally he agreed. And the whole day we played soccer not with a tin can but with a real volleyball.

Though when we started to play with this ball, it kept flying away. And we had to wait for someone to bring it back. We spent more time waiting than running around. And since we were not running around but just standing and waiting, it looked more like we were resting than playing a game.

And we all recalled how, once, we played with a small rubber ball. There was probably a little hole in it. Because it was only half inflated. That was why we were able to get it from one of the girls. And that was also why this ball would not fly when

we kicked it. It would just plop to the ground like something dead.

That was the most suitable ball for our soccer. But then the girl took her ball back. And we continued to play with a tin can.

Today we had to surround ourselves with little kids, so that they could pass the ball back to us. But you can expect little help from little ones.

If, for example, one of them runs after the ball and catches it, he will not just throw it back to us. Because he knows that he will not be able to throw it that far. So he runs and puffs back with the ball. But as he gets closer, he does not throw the ball either. Otherwise he will look like a girl, who cannot kick the ball with her foot.\*

And he does not want everyone to think that he is like a girl, who cannot kick the ball with her foot. So this kid puts the ball down on the ground. But he cannot just kick the ball either. He needs to take at least a few steps back to kick with some force.

So he takes a few steps back. But the ball starts to roll away. Meanwhile we are just standing and waiting.

At that point it occurs to the kid that the ball needs to be placed so that it does not roll. And again he runs up and kicks it. But when one of the little kids kicks a ball, it can fly in any direction.

So it turned out that it would be better if one of us would just run for the ball himself. But we still waited for the kids to do it. Because, first, it was very funny to watch them. And second, we let the little kids get used to the ball too. We did not mind.

Later that night I was telling my parents how funny it was to watch the little kid attempt to kick the ball. And Mom said

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\* In Soviet Russia, almost everyone was under the impression that women could not and should not play soccer. This opinion was supported by the Soviet law prohibiting women from playing the game.

that maybe it was the first time ever that this little kid had kicked a ball. And Dad noted that the important thing was that it should not be his last time.

And I saw that Mom was not at all pleased with Dad's comment. She gave him THE look and told me that Dad hoped that the father of the little kid would, one day, buy him a ball. And Dad agreed that he really did hope that the father of the little kid could, some day, buy him a ball.\* But I felt that Mom was still not satisfied with Dad's comment.

And she said, "For all your Aesopian language and your big mouth..." and then stopped for a second. But I continued for her, "... you will end up in prison someday."

And Mom and Dad started to laugh. Because it was very funny.

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\* The boy's dad, obviously, meant to imply a strong possibility that either the little kid or his father might be, one day, imprisoned.

## *My Friend Gleb Paramonov*

My friend Gleb Paramonov does not do too well in school. But he does not do too badly either. Though I think he could have been one of the top students. But he does not find school interesting, and he often complains to me about it.

But today he suddenly admitted to me that he liked physics lessons. He said that he loved the stories our physics teacher told us about different inventions and discoveries. And that he really liked listening to our physics teacher explain how inventors came up with interesting ideas.

And we started to remember the time when our physics teacher told us about Russian scientists and inventors. He said that they were very observant. That was why Russians made all the most important discoveries and inventions.

Our physics teacher told us how, once, the Cherepanov brothers were sitting in the kitchen while something was cooking on the stove in a large saucepan under a heavy cover. And when everything in the saucepan was fully cooked, the cover was knocked off by vapor. And someone in the kitchen said, "Wow! That's some force!"

And the Cherepanov brothers thought that vapor really is a powerful force. And shortly thereafter they invented the steam locomotive.

Our physics teacher also told us about Popov who was once sitting on the bank of a river, throwing pebbles into the water. He was looking at how the circles were spreading out and figured that perhaps other types of waves might travel the

same way too. Afterwards, he invented the radio. And later everyone began to call the invention by the name of its inventor – Popov's radio.

The physics teacher also asked us whether we knew what else Russians had invented. And one boy raised his hand and said that Russians had invented everything. And the physics teacher praised him for his excellent answer but said that he had been hoping for some specific examples.

Then another boy raised his hand and said that Russians invented the horse. He said that later, everyone began to call the horse by the name of its inventor – Przhevalsky's horse.

Then our teacher said that he had something different in mind. He was hoping that one of us would recall Mozhaisky. And he began to tell us how Mozhaisky had looked at flying birds. But he had not looked at those birds that were flapping their wings. He had looked at those that were just hovering in the air with their wings stretched out. And he soon invented the airplane.

Then I asked Gleb whether there was anything else he liked about school. And Gleb answered that there was nothing else he liked. But he especially hated geography lessons.

Well, it was not news since I and everyone else already knew that Gleb hates geography. It all began when Gleb got a completely undeserved two in geography. And today Gleb and I once again remembered all the details of that story.

We remembered everything from the start, from the moment when our geography teacher showed up in our classroom for the first time. She surprised us from the very beginning. She entered the classroom and, for some reason, did not say "Hello." The first thing she said was that she hated when someone did anything on the sly. And then she spent the entire class telling us that she did not mind joking. But the joke had to be witty. Only then would it count as a good joke.

When the geography teacher came to our class for the second time, she again, did not say a word about geography. She just kept telling us about how she loved good jokes and

hated when someone just sat very quietly at his desk and did things on the sly.

And I did not know how I should behave in her class. I was already blamed for most of the jokes played in school, and I did not want to start with my jokes right during the first geography lessons. But I was also afraid that if I just sat there, quietly, the geography teacher would think that I was doing something on the sly.

When the bell rang, the geography teacher remembered the subject of geography and told us what we should read in the textbook for the next lesson.

She began the next lesson by telling us that she forgot to say the most important thing. She forgot to say that she hated when someone just sat very quietly at his desk and did things on the sly. And that she loved a good joke. And she asked us whether we remembered what a good joke is.

And suddenly, without even bothering to get up from his seat, Gleb said, "A good joke is when someone jokes well."

Later Gleb confessed to me that he really thought that from that moment on, the geography teacher would never think that he could ever do anything on the sly and that she would always love him. But then something unexpected happened. The geography teacher looked at Gleb over the rim of her glasses and called him up to the blackboard. And before Gleb could even open his mouth, she asked him, "Where is the Eastern European Plain located?"

Gleb answered, "The Eastern European plain is located in Eastern Europe."

And I was very surprised by Gleb's quick thinking. Because neither he nor I, of course, have ever heard anything about the Eastern European Plain. But somehow it seemed that he, most likely, gave an absolutely correct answer to the question.

And I also noted to myself that Gleb did not just answer "In Eastern Europe." Because our teachers would always lower the mark by one full grade for such incomplete answers. Instead,

he said, "The Eastern European Plain is located in Eastern Europe." So then I was only curious whether the geography teacher would ask him anything else or just give him a five right then and there.

But she looked at Gleb angrily and said, "Sit down. A two."

After this incident, Gleb became somewhat withdrawn. And he started to say that he did not like anything about school. That was why I was very pleased when Gleb told me that he liked physics class.

And again, we started to remember what our physics teacher was telling us. And Gleb said that it was pretty cool that Russian scientists and inventors were so observant. It was great that the Cherepanov brothers paid attention to the saucepan, and that Popov watched the circles in the water, and Mozhaisky looked at the birds.

And I said that it would be interesting to ask our physics teacher how electricity was invented. Because I suspected that the person who invented electricity was probably struck by lightning. But I was a bit worried that Gleb might be offended by that.

But Gleb was not offended. He laughed and said that he was thinking the same thing. He added that the person who invented electricity must have been very observant. Because if he had not been observant, he would not have noticed that he had been struck by lightning. And then there would be no way for him to invent electricity.

## *Kogan*

I have always dreamed about having a bike. But no one was going to buy one for me. And I knew that.

But one day Dad came home from work and told Mom that someone by the name of Kogan, who works with my dad, was selling a bike. And he was not asking much for it.

Mom began to ask Dad who this Kogan was and why he was selling a bike. And Dad said that they had been working at the same place for many years. And that Kogan was a very good person. And that he purchased the bike for his son.

But later Kogan was taken away. (I understood that to mean that Kogan was taken to prison.) And because of that, his son never used the bike. When Kogan returned, his son was already grown and no longer needed a bike.

Mom said that she understood everything then. And I was very surprised that Mom said that she understood everything. Well, to hear that Kogan was imprisoned and was still a good person – that was not surprising to me. It was not the first time I had heard that. And I had long ago gotten used to that.

But why did Kogan's son not use the bike while his father was in prison? That was not clear. And I highly doubted that. I mean, I doubted that the bike was brand new.

But that was not what surprised me the most. What surprised me the most was that Kogan spent all that time in prison and my dad was never in prison, yet my dad and Kogan had been working at the same place for many years. So how they managed to work together for many years, that I did not yet know.

Well, what was I to do then? Ask my parents all these questions?

On the one hand, they do not like these types of questions, but on the other hand, they do not keep too many secrets from me either. So it seemed easier to just figure things out for myself.

Besides, I did not want my Mom to remind me that it was not necessary for anyone else to know what was being discussed at home and that it would be best if I just kept quiet. So I did not bother asking any questions.

I only said that if this bike was brand new and was being sold at a cheap price, it seemed to me that – only if, of course, neither Mom nor Dad objected, and if I would not ride it on the streets but would only ride in our yard, and I would do well and behave in school and everywhere else – it would probably be worth it to buy this bike as soon as possible or, better yet, immediately.

After that everything seemed like a dream. Mom and Dad agreed to buy the bike. Three days later the bike was already standing in our hallway. And right there, in the hallway, I sat on it. And I did not want to get off.

And as for Kogan, everything turned out to be absolutely true. He and my dad did work at the same place. Kogan was imprisoned right in there. I mean, right where he worked. Or maybe it is better to say that he worked right where he was imprisoned. But while he was imprisoned, Dad did not see him but knew that Kogan was working, imprisoned somewhere not far away.

And his son did not use the bike because neither he nor his mother did anything other than just sit and wait to be sent to prison too. And the bike turned out to be without a single scratch. Absolutely brand new.

## *To America - for Gold*

Our most exciting game is Leap Over. And I am probably not yet old enough to really play this game. Well, to play like the older boys do. Once, when my Mom saw how the older boys jumped, she was horrified. She said that she did not understand how all of them managed not to break their spines. She also said that these boys did not have any sense of responsibility.

My mom often says that if she sees someone doing something wrong. Once I asked her whether I had a sense of responsibility. And Mom replied that I did my homework with a sense of responsibility. But I had very little of it for anything else.

Well, I still do not really understand much about the sense of responsibility. But it seems to me that it is very unlikely that you may break your spine while playing Leap Over. It would be much easier to break it while playing Elephant. Because when you play Elephant, everyone is trying to jump on top of the weakest guy. While two boys are already hanging on to his neck and on top of his shoulders, two others are trying to jump on top of his back.

And as for Leap Over, it only looks as though it is possible to break your spine. Everyone leaps over the same way as in Leapfrog. But in Leapfrog, you can take as many steps as you want. You cannot do it in Leap Over.

For example, someone "leaps over with a two." He starts to run, takes two huge steps, then one last push, and flies in the air for a few meters. Then he pushes off with his hands on the

back of the boy who is “it” and leaps over him. Then it is considered that he “got it”.

No harm done to the boy who is “it.” And all you can do is breathe a sigh of envy for the one who jumped. Of course, I cannot do it the same way that the older boys do it. So, I just stand on the side, admire their jumps, and dream that one day I too will be able to jump like them.

But honestly, from time to time, bad things do happen. For example, when the one who leaps over makes a mistake. It is good if he understands that he will not be able to make it. Then he can stop himself in time.

But if he does not know what he is doing, or if it is his last attempt, when it does not matter whether he knows what he is doing or not and he just must leap over – in this case, he might badly injure both himself and the boy who is “it.” Especially, of course, the boy who is “it”. Because in such cases, the one who is “it” will be propelled forward a few meters and will nosedive into the asphalt.

And then bloody knees, hands, and face are inevitable. But even in such cases, your spine should be safe.

When older boys are not there, then we, I mean those who are a little younger, also play Leap Over. But there is never a lot of blood. Scraped knees, hands, and torn clothing – there is enough of that. But a lot of blood is a rare sight.

And when we want to relax a bit, we play Donkey. Then boys of all ages play together. And here, if you are “it,” you do not have to worry about nosediving into asphalt. Because Donkey is a quiet game.

“Hello donkey.” “Goodbye donkey.” “Whip the donkey.” Everything is easy. The boy who is “it” positions himself the same way as in Leap Over: bent over, with his hands resting on his knees. The only difference is that in Donkey he is turned to you sideways.

The first difficulty occurs when you spur the donkey. You shout, “Spur the donkey!” And as you are leaping over him, in

mid air, you have to smack his behind with your foot. Not everyone can do that.

Then the next obstacle: "Load the donkey." Here it is especially difficult to be the last one to leap over. Because all boys have already put their caps on the back of the donkey. And some of them are barely staying on top. And now you have to put another cap on the back and leap over the donkey so that none of the caps falls off.

And there is another one: "Unload the donkey." Now whoever is first faces the biggest difficulty. The rest is pretty simple: "To America – for gold," "From America – with crap."

And only at the very end, when we shout "Aim, Load, Fire," then the one who is "it" may be "fired" in such way that he will not be happy at all.

"Aim" is when the one who is "it" is turned to the spot to which he should fall. "Load" – this is clear. Before "Fire," there may be "Check fuse," which is also clear. And then comes – "Fire." Here we hit the behind of the guy who is "it" with our behind. And if an older boy does that, he can send "it" flying pretty far.

When Mom heard about all these "To America – for gold" and "From America – with crap," she told Dad that she had thought that everyone respected Americans. But then she realized that everyone hated them.

And Dad said that actually, both were true. He said that it was a Russian tradition to treat Americans with a reverent hostility.

Older boys do not play Donkey often. And even if they play it once in a while, then afterwards they go back to playing Leap Over.

Some of our boys do not play Leap Over not because they are afraid to hurt themselves but because of their clothes. If you rip your uniform, you will have to go to school in the ripped uniform for many months until it is too small for you. And some have to wear it even afterwards.

Last week, one of our boys changed after school. He put on his gym uniform. I mean he put on the clothes we wear during gym class. And since he played Leap Over all day long, he ripped his gym uniform so much that it needed major repairs.

Next day we had gym class. And the boy who tore his gym uniform told our PE teacher that he could not go to class because he did not have his uniform. To be more accurate, he, for some reason, lied a little and said that he forgot his uniform at home.

The PE teacher made him undress. But it had become really cold outside in literally just one day. And the boy had to do all the exercises in his underpants. I must say that our boys did not laugh at him. And the girls did not even look at him.

I did not laugh either. I just kept thinking, what if that had happened to me. I mean, what if I had forgotten my uniform at home. And because of these thoughts, I became so scared that I was pretty far from wanting to laugh.

At home I told my mom that from that moment on, every evening before gym class, I would hang the bag with my uniform on the door so as to not forget to take it with me to school in the morning. And I thought that I was beginning to have a kind of reverent hostility for the bag with my uniform.

But my mom liked that I suggested hanging the bag with my uniform on the door. And I heard her telling Dad that at last the child was beginning to show some sense of responsibility.

## *Étude of Kreisler*

When I pick up my violin, I always want to go to the bathroom. But not because I do not like to play the violin. I do like to play the violin. I really like it. Well, I mean my mom thinks that I really like to play the violin. She says that it is a great, enormous pleasure.

Actually, it really is a great pleasure when a person can play it well. However, so far, I cannot play too well. Of course, now I play much better than before, when I just drew my bow across open strings. Then I would get dizzy and nauseous. Once I even fainted. But now it is not as disgusting.

But for whatever reason, no one really understands how people learn to play. Every time guests come to our house, one of them always remembers about me and asks me to play the violin.

They probably think that I will play *Zigeunerweisen* or Monti's Czardas for them. But I cannot play *Zigeunerweisen* and I cannot play Czardas. I can only bring in my music stand, place sheet music on it, and play something boring.

Now, for example, I can play the étude of Kreisler for them. Then all our guests will immediately fall from their chairs. And they will fall from their chairs because I cannot play the étude well. I am still only learning it. And I have already forgotten what I played on last year's exam. Although, honestly, I probably could play from the sheet music what I played last year. But no one knows where that sheet music is.

But of course I cannot explain this to our guests. In the past, I tried to explain such things to them. But they would only say

that I was behaving like a real artist. And it was both offensive and funny. And by the way, I do not understand why they would mention a real artist.

Now I do not even try to explain anything to our guests. I just tell them that I do not want to play. When they start to insist, I say that I want to go to the bathroom. And that is always the truth. Because as soon as the first guest remembers about me and the violin, then right that second, I really need to go to the bathroom.

Sometimes I wonder why I want to go to the bathroom when I play the violin. Why do I not want to go to the bathroom when I eat ice cream? This idea is very far from my mind when I eat ice cream.

Maybe I really do not like to play? No, that is not true. I do like to play the violin. My mom is right, I am very lucky to be learning to play the violin.

Actually, I am the only one who is that lucky. In our yard, no one plays the violin. And not just the violin. No one plays anything. While I practice, all other boys are out in our yard.

And I do not even know why no one plays violin. Maybe everyone in our yard is tone deaf? No, I seriously doubt that. The other kids' parents probably did not realize in time that it is a great joy to be able to play the violin.

That must be it! That is why all other kids are out in our yard while I practice. Probably, only my parents were clever enough to recognize that to play the violin is a great joy. And a great, enormous pleasure.

## *Rhododendron*

I got a two in botany. Our assistant principal teaches botany in our school. She recently called on me to tell the class about rhododendrons. And when she called on me, she pronounced it "rhododerdons." She always says "rhododerdons." And I always want to laugh when she says it like that. But I keep it to myself because I know that if I laugh, she will expel me from school.

Our botany teacher pronounces many words in a funny way, not like everyone else. She stresses the wrong syllable in the word "Israel." And she makes this word sound very insulting.

She sounds even more insulting when she talks about Americans. Though, in our school, everyone talks insultingly about Americans. But our botany teacher says it in a funny way. She skips the first letter in the word "Americans." She just pronounces it "Mericans."

My friend, Gleb Paramonov, mimics her and says, "The Mericans have bloated bellies from starvation while their Merican president drinks Coca-Cola and plays golf!" And that always sounds very funny.

And so our botany teacher called on me to talk about rhododendrons. I started to sketch a rhododendron on the right half of the blackboard. And someone from our class already finished drawing on the left side of the blackboard and began to explain the drawing. By the time he finished speaking, I had finished sketching my rhododendron.

And then everything happened very quickly. Our botany teacher turned to me and asked what I was going to talk about.

And I said that I was going to talk about rhododendrons. I pronounced it the usual way. And I looked at her. She looked at me and said, "Sit down. A two."

When I came home from school and told my mom that I got a two in botany, she could not believe it. She began questioning me about what happened in class. And I replied that I talked about "rhododerdons" - I pronounced it like our botany teacher pronounced it.

But Mom asked me not to clown around. And I said that I was not clowning and that our botany teacher said it that way. Then Mom began to question me on all the details. Finally she said she did not believe it.

When Mom said that she did not believe it, I just burst into tears. It was not like they started to flow down my face - they just sprayed from my eyes. And then Mom said that I misunderstood her. When she said that she did not believe it, she did not mean that she did not believe me. Of course she believed me. She just could not believe that it actually might happen.

And I said that it was the same thing - not to believe me or not to believe that it actually might happen. But my mom explained to me that when people said that they could not believe something, they often meant that it was just difficult to believe in something. And Mom said that she meant that it was just hard to believe that such a thing could actually happen. She added that tomorrow she would go to school and sort things out.

Next day Mom did go to school to sort things out. When she came home, I began asking her what happened there. But Mom was saying things I could not understand.

Then Dad came home. And Mom started to tell him something quietly. But I still heard that Mom said that she asked our assistant principal, "Why are you yelling at me?" Finally, Mom said to Dad that our assistant principal was just plain stupid.

But Dad added that her being "stupid" was not the worst of it. The worst of it was that she was a bitch and a KGB agent. And Mom looked at me in fear. Since she understood that I heard it, she said to Dad, "Why are you saying such rough words?"

Dad did not reply and only looked at the wall. "Why do you say these things in front of the child?" Mom added.

And here Dad started to say things to Mom so that I was able to hear everything. He said that our assistant principal had been trying to chase Maria Lvovna out of the school and would have done it a long time ago if the principal had not stood in her way.

And again Mom asked Dad, "Why do you say all this in front of the child?" But she did not say it like she said it the first time. Now she sounded very uncertain.

And here Dad stood up from his chair and said very loudly, "Because I want our child to know that the assistant principal is a bitch and a KGB agent," and left the room.

I was really surprised to hear Dad say all these words. Because before that, I only heard such things when Dad whispered them to someone. But now he said it aloud, and it seemed like he did that for me. And I was only surprised why no one reminded me that I should keep my mouth closed.

But then Mom raised her eyes at me and said, "You know..." And of course, I confirmed that I knew everything. I knew that it was not necessary to tell everyone what we discussed at home. And I also said that I wanted to go out to the yard to play. And Mom replied to me, "Yes, I know that you are all grown up. Go play, of course."

As I ran downstairs, I thought to myself how lucky I am that Mom and Dad are my mom and my dad. And when I ran out to the street, I forgot that my mom asked me not to slam the door so loudly that everyone else in our house could hear it. And the door slammed, of course. And most likely everyone in our house heard it. And I think that everyone in the house next to ours heard it too.

## *The Black Day*

Our neighbors bought a TV. Their TV looks like something out of a fairy tale. It does not have a big screen: just ten by fourteen centimeters.\* But when there is no static, you can see everything just perfectly.

I think that we are very lucky that our neighbors bought a TV. They invite us over sometimes if an interesting movie is on.

Just yesterday they invited us over to watch a movie called "Circus." I knew that Dad was dying to see this movie. And I even knew why. I heard a conversation between Mom and Dad. And from this conversation, I learned that some scene was edited out from this movie. And Dad really hoped that this time it had been added back in.

But the problem was that children under fourteen were not allowed to watch this movie. And if I did not go to see the movie, then Mom would not go too. Then it would turn out that Dad should not go either.

Well, Dad started asking why in the world children under fourteen were not allowed to watch the movie. And Mom said to Dad quietly, through clenched teeth, that there was nothing bad about the movie. And since the child did not understand anything anyway, she did not object to me watching this film.

But since Mom was speaking very quietly, Dad asked her to say it again. Then I asked Mom why she still treated me like a child. And at that point, Mom gave Dad THE look as if to say

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\* Size 10 by 14 centimeters means a four by six screen with a 7-inch diagonal.

that even the child has understood everything already while Dad still kept asking questions.

Anyway, we went to our neighbors to watch the movie. Mom brought with her a piece of the pie she baked yesterday. And the reason she baked the pie was because we ran out of money. When we run out of money, Mom always declares it a black day and bakes pies.

She declares a black day as a joke, but we do run out of money. Not as a joke. But since Mom's pies are always very tasty, I like Mom's black days. And Mom's black days actually turn out to be not so black.

The day before yesterday, Dad and I already knew that a black day was coming. The day before yesterday, Mom told us that we had run out of money and she was going to borrow twenty-five rubles from our neighbor until next payday.

Of course Mom was not going to borrow money from our next door neighbor. Mom was going to borrow money from the neighbors who bought the TV.

I think that our next door neighbor does not have money at all. And this is why I think so. Mom was once peeling potatoes in the kitchen. And the neighbor asked Mom whether she was throwing away the peels. And when Mom replied that she did throw away the peels, the neighbor asked for the peels to be given to her instead. So my mom started to give the peels to our neighbor. And the neighbor told us that the peels are no worse than the potato itself and maybe even healthier.

And so, Mom decided to borrow twenty-five rubles from our other neighbor. But when Mom saw her in the kitchen, the neighbor herself asked my mom whether she could borrow twenty-five rubles from my Mom until next payday. After that Mom declared that we had to have a black day.

And then Dad asked Mom how it happened that Gogol had run out of money.\*

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\* Nikolai Gogol is a famous Russian writer.

And I know why Dad asked about Gogol's money. On payday, Mom divides all the meal money into equal sums and hides them in Gogol's book. She puts money for the first day of the month on page 10, money for the second day of the month she puts on page 20, and so on.

Since yesterday was the seventh day of the month, Dad asked why there was no money on the seventieth page of the Gogol's book.

And Mom explained to Dad that she had neither the time nor the desire to shop every day for the same stuff. Therefore, she often bought some things to last for the next few days. And therefore, she sometimes had to take Gogol's money from the next pages.

And before Dad could object, Mom asked him whether he knew how much a kilogram of meat costs. Dad replied that he did.

But Mom said she doubted that Dad really knew that. And she doubted because had Dad known that, he would not have asked Mom why we ran out of money.

Dad said nothing. But it became clear that he absolutely and completely agreed with Mom.

And Mom, certainly, understood that. And Dad understood that Mom understood everything that he did not say. And I, of course, understood everything that my dad did not say and that my mom understood.

And so we went to see the movie. And at the end of it, my dad saw what he wanted to see. And he was terribly pleased by that. He looked at the TV screen and whispered, "Mikhoels, Mikhoels." \*

I was also happy to see the movie. And I also saw what I wanted to see. I mean, the reason that children under fourteen are not allowed to watch the movie.

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\* Solomon Mikhoels was a famous Russian-Jewish actor and producer killed by Soviet secret agents in the street.

## *The Trick*

There is a tradition in our yard. It is called “fly away, my coin.” This tradition is pretty cruel. And I cannot tell my mom about it because if I told her, she would probably never let me go out to the yard.

Though, I have to say, worse things happen in our yard. Once, my skull was punctured by a rock. So I was bleeding. And I got stitches in a hospital. But afterwards my mom still let me go out to the yard.

I even told my mom about the knock-knocker. And the knock-knocker, if you think about it, is also pure hooliganism.

One of our boys makes his way up to the roof. There, he ties one end of a coarse thread to something. Then he attaches a small stick to the other end of the thread and ties a small pebble in the middle of the thread.

After that, he throws the stick down from the roof. And we pick this stick up. Then we sit down somewhere on the pavement. And no one can even imagine that there is a thread tied between us and the roof.

And so, we begin to pull and let go of the thread. And the pebble, which happens to be near some window, starts to knock at that window. And almost immediately someone looks out the window and tries to see who is knocking.

As soon as this person comes to the window, we pull on our thread. We pull on our thread so that this person sees nothing. And when he walks away from the window, we begin to knock on the window again. And of course, it always ends up being very funny.

Many other things happen in our yard. And I always tell my mom about them. But I have never told my mom about the coin, and I will never tell her about it.

The tradition with the coin consists of having everyone pee on the newcomer. And everyone pees not just a little bit but in full force. So that the newcomer ends up being completely soaked.

As soon as someone new comes to our yard for the first time, we ask him right away whether he wants to see an interesting trick. The newcomer, of course, wants to see it and only asks what this trick is about. And we answer that the trick is called "fly away, my coin." And immediately someone takes a handkerchief out of a pocket and someone else brings a coin.

So, three boys and the newcomer stand in a circle, stretch out the handkerchief, with each holding a corner of the handkerchief by his teeth. The newcomer also has to hold his corner of the handkerchief by his teeth.

This way, the handkerchief is stretched out between them. They put the coin on the handkerchief and tell the newcomer to do only one thing: to constantly repeat "fly-away-my-coin, fly-away-my-coin." And then, they say, the coin will fly away.

And all begin to chant "fly-away-my-coin, fly-away-my-coin." Well, of course they cannot say "fly-away-my-coin" because they are holding the handkerchief with their teeth. So they are only able to say something like "ly-aney-na-noin, ly-aney-na-noin."

What goes on beneath the handkerchief, the newcomer does not see. Because the handkerchief obscures the view. He is only too glad to howl together with the rest, "ly-aney-na-noin, ly-aney-na-noin." And in a couple of minutes, everyone scatters and only then does the newcomer realize what happened.

Last year it happened again with a newcomer. His name was Serge. He and his mother moved to our building at the very end of August. And when we played this joke on him, he ran straight home and never came to the yard again.

In September, he did not go to school. Everyone was saying that Serge's mom was afraid to let him leave the room. And people from our school came to talk to her. They talked about something for a long time. And after that, Serge went to school.

When Mom first told Dad about Serge and his mother, Dad asked which room they had moved to. And Mom said that they had moved to the room that had just been vacated. "Just vacated?" asked my dad.\*

Then Mom gave Dad THE look. That meant that Dad was not supposed to ask this type of question in front of me.

Dad did not say anything. He just closed his eyes and, after a second, opened them again. That meant that he did not completely agree with Mom.

Mom raised her eyebrows. And her eyes opened wide for a second. And I understood that to mean that Mom had agreed with Dad but with some reluctance. And she replied that she did not know what happened to the previous tenants.

Serge still does not come out to play. His mom does not let him. She is still too scared.

My mom knows that Serge's mom does not let him go to the yard, but she does *not know why*. *And when my dad heard from Mom that Serge's mom is scared to let him go out to the yard, he asked, "Aren't they scared to be at home?"\** Maybe he had the knock-knocker in mind. Though I am not sure about it at all, of course.

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\* The boy's dad obviously meant that the room was vacated because the neighbors were arrested.

\* The boy's dad obviously meant that Serge's mom should be scared to be at home and wait for a KGB agent's knock on the door.

## *Lisa*

On Sunday evening, I went for a ride on my bike. And I saw Lisa coming out of her building. She had a bag in her hand. And while I was riding around the yard, she passed my building, turned right at the corner, and then turned right again. By that time, I already knew for sure that she was going to the trolley bus stop. And I knew exactly what store her parents had sent her to.

And Lisa and I had a strange thing happen to us. Two years ago we were merged with the girls in school. The first time we heard a rumor about that, everyone started saying how bad it would be. Not one of our boys wanted to be merged with them. And since everyone said that, I also had to say the same thing.

Though I would not be the first to say that it would be really bad. But if someone else said so and asked me to confirm that it would be very bad, I was just forced to say that it would be very bad.

But really, I wanted to have girls in our school. And right up to the beginning of the school year, I thought it would be too good to be true. And I now think that everyone perhaps wanted to be merged with them at that time. But nobody wanted to acknowledge it.

My friend, Gleb Paramonov, once told me that if any girl, even if she was not pretty, approached him and told him that she wanted to be friends, he would be very happy. But after that, he still told everyone that he was against being together

with the girls. And when I reminded him of our conversation about "any girl, even if she was not pretty," he told me a story.

Gleb told me about a time when he and his mother stopped by their friends' apartment. At that moment, their friends were having dinner and invited Gleb and his mother to join them. Gleb was just about to sit down at the table when his mother suddenly and unexpectedly for Gleb said that they had just eaten and did not want to eat.

When Gleb later asked his mother why she had refused to eat, his mom replied that well-mannered people should always refuse a meal. Only ill-mannered people can say, "All right, now we will eat everything that you have here." And Gleb asked me whether I knew about such a rule. I replied that I knew certainly about it.

And here Gleb asked me not to tell anyone about this story.\* When I replied that I did not see anything wrong with it, Gleb said that I did not understand anything. And that I should not tell anyone about it. Gleb said, "I am not worried about myself, I am worried about my mom."

I asked Gleb how it all was related to girls. Then Gleb said that people did not always say what they thought. And although Gleb's example did not convince me, I stopped arguing with him. Although I did agree with him about the meals.

One time it so happened that I ate at someone's home. And as I helped myself to the food, everyone watched what I took and how much. I did not feel comfortable there and ate almost nothing.

And then, two years ago, before we were merged with the girls, my mom once told me that she met Lisa's mother. And Lisa's mother told my mom that at every school desk, a girl would be sitting with a boy. And that Lisa, when she found out

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\* "Don't tell anybody!" – was a part of almost every conversation at that time. People were afraid to talk about any topic because of the threat of arrest.

about it, said that she wanted to sit only with me. And my mom sounded very indifferent when she told me that.

For some reason, whenever I come home with wet feet or wet back, Mom always makes a huge deal about it. Though I come home with something wet nearly every day. But as for Lisa's comment, my mom reported it in such a casual manner as if she was talking about some event that happened every day. In the same tone as she would say that Lisa had a runny nose.

It turned out that when my mom was talking to Lisa's mom, someone else's mom was there too. And since someone else's mom was there, shortly afterwards everyone found out about that conversation. And everyone began to say things about me and Lisa. And the things they said were ridiculous and stupid.

And then, two years ago, when we came to school together with girls for the first time, we were all asked with whom we wanted to sit at the same desk. And Gleb said that he wanted to sit with me. And I then said that I wanted to sit with Gleb.

So Gleb and I again sat together at the same school desk. And everyone sat like that: boys with boys, and girls with girls. And Gleb ran around the school, telling everyone how happy he was not to have to sit next to a girl. To this day, we still sit this way: boys with boys, girls with girls. To this day, boys and girls never talk to each other.

Only Lisa and I talk sometimes. Therefore, silly rumors still continue to go around about Lisa and me.

Because of that, I started to think about Lisa all the time. I start to think about her as soon as I wake up. And at school I think only about her. I think about her when I come home from school. And I think about her only because of all that ridiculous and stupid gossip. And when I try to sleep, I also think about Lisa. Even though I do not want to think about her at all.

So yesterday evening, when I saw Lisa go to the trolley bus stop, I also rode out to the street and began to chase the trolley. Because I wanted to surprise her by how far from my house I can ride.

When Lisa got off the trolley, I rode over to her and asked, "Working?" But Lisa did not reply and only slightly shrugged in disapproval. And when Lisa shrugged, I became very ashamed. And I started to scold myself for what I did.

I was in a bad mood all Sunday. On Monday, I tried not to bump into Lisa. Because I thought that she might shrug again and say something unpleasant to me.

But on Tuesday, I finally bumped into her on the school staircase. And suddenly she said, "What if I tell your mother how far you go on your bike?"

I did not know what to reply to her. I just shrugged indifferently. But still, as soon as she said this, I felt very happy. I do not think I have ever been happier in my life. And I was very surprised at how much my mood could change so drastically because of nothing. I mean, that it could be my best mood ever. Well, maybe just once before, I was in a better mood. When my parents bought me a bike.

## *A Symphony Orchestra*

It was raining all day today. I came home from school and decided to do all of my homework first. But when I was finished with everything, it was still raining. You do not go to the yard in the rain. Though you could try and find someone on the staircase. But it is pretty boring on the staircase. There they either torture cats, fire up smokers, or hang candles.

Well, I cannot stand cats. But chasing them around the stairs is not for me. They do cause a lot of harm, of course. On the stairs, it always stinks of cat urine.

Well, actually, that is what everyone says. But I think that it is not only cat urine that stinks. It is very possible that drunks go to our staircase. That is why it stinks of urine.

As for a smoker, it is a very scary thing. You make it out of ordinary old photo film. You only need to shove this photo film deep into something where there is no air.

Then you need to set it on fire and then immediately put the fire out. It starts to make a lot of smoke. And it makes so much smoke that the smoker begins to fly. It hits the walls and flies up to the ceiling while still making a lot of smoke. The smell is nauseating. And because of the smell, I do not like to have anything to do with smokers.

But I did hang candles on our stairs. Although once I learned how to do it, it was no longer that interesting. In any case, it is a pity to ruin the stairs without any reason.

But in the beginning, I could not even imagine how it was possible to hang up a candle. I did not even think that I would be able to do it.

But everything turned out to be very simple. You need to spit on the wall. Then you have to scrape the wall at the place where you spit, using the other end of the wooden match. If you do it carefully and turn the match, lime from the wall, mixed with your saliva, forms gradually a sticky lump at the end of the match. After that you only need to light your match and throw it up to the ceiling.

We are so good at this that the match sticks to the ceiling on the first try. And the match still continues to burn. And a black stain appears on the ceiling. On a rainy evening our boys can smoke up all the ceilings along all our staircases.

And adults are always very unhappy about it. They call the police. And they try to catch the ones who do it. And those who do not have children are angry with those who do. But it is all for nothing because it is practically impossible to catch anyone.

However, adults and the police still try to catch us. But they cannot. It would be much easier for them to catch the drunks. But they do not bother. Probably because there are too many drunks. And if all of them were caught, there would not be anyone left.

There is much more harm from drunks than from us. Because it is very difficult to find where our candles hang. And when can you actually see them? Maybe only on Sunday. You cannot see them on weekdays. Because in the daytime, when it is light out, everyone is either at school or at work.\* In the morning and in the evening, it is always dark on the stairs. It is very rare that even a single bulb is actually lit.

And when I have to go home, I like for someone else to go inside the hallway as well. Because it is very scary to go alone in the hallway when it is dark.

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\* At that time, in Soviet Russia, Sundays were the only days off. On Saturday, adults went to work while kids went to school.

And if I have to go alone, I never walk, I run. Even as I am running up the stairs, I am still scared that someone will grab me from behind. And I always have chills running down my spine.

And when I ring the doorbell three times and my mom opens the door for me, she certainly realizes that I ran up the stairs. And she always asks, "Who was chasing you?"

And as I was thinking about all of this today, my mom finally came home and asked, "Did you spend the whole day, just sitting here like this?" And I said, "Yes, I sat at home all day." Mom asked me whether I had had things to do. And I answered that of course I had had things to do.

Whenever my mom asks me that, I recall something that happened once, when I was probably only about six years old. I told Mom that I was bored and that I did not know what to do. And Mom answered that she would book a symphony orchestra.

I did not ask what a symphony orchestra is, I guess because I already knew what it is. But I did ask Mom why she was going to book it.

And Mom replied that she was kidding about the symphony orchestra to make me understand that I was a big boy already and should be able to make things up to engage myself. Especially because there were a lot of different ways to find something to do.

I was very surprised to hear that and asked Mom what she was talking about. And my mom said that she would only explain each thing once and then I would have to make things up on my own.

My mom showed me a few books that I could read. She said that I could draw a table, chairs, and the other objects in our room and also portraits of Dad and all of my friends. As well as the tram, trucks, and our house. And then I started to tell Mom about what else I could draw.

Mom explained to me that everything I drew, I could then cut out with scissors. And she showed me how to fold a piece of paper a few times and then cut it to create beautiful snowflakes.

She also showed me how to place a piece of paper over a five-kopeck coin and go over it with a pencil to make an exact replica of that coin. And then, she said, I could cut this replica out with scissors. And I added that I could make many of these replica-coins and play Supermarket.

When Mom finished explaining all of that to me, I understood that I would never tell her again that I was bored and that I had nothing to do. So today, I was even surprised that Mom asked me whether I had had anything to do. And when I replied that I had had something to do, Mom said that the rain had stopped and that I could go out into the yard. "Just don't hang out on the staircase," said Mom.

I quickly swallowed a tablespoon of cod-liver oil, took a bite of rye bread with salt, put on my jacket, and ran down the stairs.

And I decided that today I would not hang out on the staircase. Even though two hours ago, I put a box of matches in the pocket of my pants. For no reason. Just in case.

## *The Old Woman and the Cart*

My mom and I went to GUM last week.\* And while we were there, we stood in line for ice cream. Because the kind of ice cream they sell in GUM cannot be found anywhere else in the world. At first, the line for ice-cream went pretty quickly, but then they ran out of ice cream. And the old woman who was selling it took her empty cart to get a refill.

The old woman left, but everyone stayed in line, waiting. After about fifteen minutes, everyone began to wonder what was taking the girl so long. And I asked Mom why everyone called the old woman a girl. And Mom said that the old woman was not really that old. And if you took the kerchief off her head, she would turn out to be pretty young.

Here the old woman showed up with her cart. And everyone began to wonder how much ice cream she had. A man in a military uniform said to someone with confidence that the ice cream would end just before this person. And after that, everyone immediately calmed down.

But it soon became very clear that the ice cream would end even earlier than the military man thought. Because many bought not just one ice cream but two. And those who stood at the end of the line started to yell that only one ice cream should be sold per person.

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\* GUM is a huge department store in the center of Moscow, on Red Square. It used to be a desired destination of each visitor of Moscow and, most often, the primary goal of the visit.

But they were yelling without any confidence, only to yell, just out of habit. Those at the end of the line always yell. That was why no one thought to listen. So many bought two ice creams. But when someone wanted to buy four ice creams, the line just blew up.

And everyone started to yell that four ice creams should not be sold to one person. And the man who wanted to buy four ice creams asked everyone, "Why not?" And the military man answered him, "If you are told that you must not, then you must not!"

And so this man could not buy four ice creams. Even after he was gone, the military man could not calm down for a long time and kept saying that "many people just do not understand one simple thing: if you are told that you must not, then you must not!"

The old woman went away with her cart again. And again we all waited for a long time. Finally, she came with a full cart of ice cream again. And my mom said that because we stood there for so long, we would buy three ice creams, not just two. Then Dad would also have some ice cream.

She also said that it would be difficult to keep the ice cream frozen until we came back home. But she said that we would do our best. Because it was very cold outside. And in the trolley it should also be very cold.

When I realized that I would not have my ice cream for the next half an hour, something inside of me just dropped. And at that very moment, Mom looked at me and said that I should eat my ice cream right away, and we would bring the other two home.

When we brought home the ice cream, Dad said that his doctor told him not to eat ice cream and that I should eat his ice cream. Dad's doctor tells Dad not to eat a lot of stuff.

This year, in the spring, Mom brought home two tomatoes. She bought them at the farmer's market since tomatoes are sold in regular stores only in the summer time. The tomatoes that

Mom brought home from the farmer's market were bright red and very beautiful. They looked magical.

And Mom asked Dad whether he knew how much she paid for these tomatoes at the farmer's market. And Dad asked how much these tomatoes cost. And when Mom replied to him, Dad's eyes widened.

And then he said that his doctor told him not to eat tomatoes. The doctor tells him not to eat many things. He tells him not to eat most fruits. Vegetables too. Not all of them, but many of them. And something else too. But I do not remember what.

So this was how I got my second ice cream. Mom gave Dad a bite of her ice-cream. And Dad took a few bites. But each time he bit off only a little piece because he did not want to disobey his doctor. And Mom gave Dad a hug and told me, "You see, our dad knows: if you are told that you must not, then you must not!"

## *Hot Countries*

Today it is real winter outside and it is very cold. And I do not like it when it is cold. I especially do not like it when it is cold and windy.

In the winter, as soon as I wake up, I already know that it is cold and windy outside. That is why I hate to wake up in the winter. And when I wake up, I think only about one thing: that very soon I will have to go outside, where it is cold and windy. And I can think of nothing else.

In the morning, I drink a cup of tea and eat what Mom gives me. I listen to how she rushes me and says that I will be late for school again and that she wonders why I move so slowly. And she often tells me that it seems like I am fully frozen.

And so, I go out onto the staircase; I slowly crawl downstairs from our fourth floor and approach the double doors out onto the street. I open the inner door and right away, I hear the wind howling. And almost every time that I come between the inside and the outside doors, I am surprised at how cold it is there. And I am afraid even to think about how cold it must be there, outside the door.

I have to push the outside door open with my entire body. Either because its spring is too tight, or because of the wind, or maybe because of both.

And then, when I have already squeezed through the door, I still need to hold it with my foot. And when I let go of it, I need to dodge the door and make sure that it does not slam on

me. And when the door closes, only then, at that moment, do I fully realize how bad things really are.

And worst of all is that it is still very dark outside. But when it is cold and dark, it is much worse than when it is cold and light. And while I am still inside our yard, it is not that cold. Because I still have my heat inside of me. But when I go out into the street, the wind starts to blow into my face hard and, most importantly, without stopping.

Of course I lower the earflaps of my hat and raise up my collar. But that does not help. The wind keeps blowing into my face, and my nose starts to freeze. Then come my cheeks. They start to freeze too. And the harsh and bristly snow flies right into my eyes.

And I forget that it is dark outside. I think only about the wind and the snow and do not even realize where I am going. But since I go there almost every day, my legs carry me where I have to go. And sometimes I ask someone, "Is there anything in the world that is worse than when it is dark, cold, snowing, windy, you are only twelve, and you are on your way to school early in the morning?"

But today, as I was going to school, I suddenly remembered the summertime and the river. And I remembered lying on the hot sand.

I lie on my stomach, with my head resting on my arms. I feel a little cold because I swam for too long and the water in the river was cold. And the water is dripping down from my nose. But then it stops dripping and I am fully dry. And I start feeling hotter and hotter. And when I get too hot, I get up and run to the river again.

As I was remembering all that today on my way to school, I thought that next time I will not run to the river, even when I become really hot. I will lie on the hot sand under the hot sun for a long, long time. I will bake myself under the sun. I will let its heat fill me completely. And I will lie for as long as I can stand it.

And when I feel that I can no longer be under the sun, I will still lie a little longer. Because I want to be hot. I want to be hot all the time.

Also today I was thinking about far away hot countries where there is no winter and it is always warm. And most importantly, we were told in school that such hot countries do exist. We were told that it is never cold in those countries but that life is not very happy there.

But I would go there anyway. I do not care. Because I cannot imagine how it could be bad where it is never cold. As for life being not very happy there - I would learn to live with that.

